



WHAT WAS THE LURKING MENACE THAT
LURED SPACEMEN TO THEIR DOOM IN
ZELLO'S MYSTERIOUS WATERS?

UNDERWORLD OF ZELLO

Jon J.
Deegan

16

"Two weeks ago I bought a 'Joan the Wad' and to-day I have won £232 10s. Please send two more." - R C., Tredegar, S. Wales.

Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book," 1931.



*Guaranteed dipped in water
from the Lucky Saint's Well*

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LUCKY CORNISH PISKEY

who
SEES ALL, HEARS ALL, DOES ALL

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If you will send me your name and address and a 1/- stamp and a stamped addressed envelope for reply, I will send you a History of the Cornish Piskey folk and the marvellous miracles they accomplish. JOAN THE WAD is the Queen of the Lucky Cornish Piskeys, and with whom good luck and good health always attend.

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AS MATCHMAKER

A young girl wrote and informed me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

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UNDERWORLD OF ZELLO

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UNDERWORLD OF ZELLO

by

Jon J. Deegan

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CHAPTER ONE

The Invisible Terror

UNSPEAKING, we cowered in icy ooze on the floor of Zello's ocean, waiting for them to find us. In greenish gloom, great weeds spread their streamers surfacewards, waving ghostly, feathery fingers in obedience to invisible currents. Sea creatures might lurk among the twining roots or in nameless hollows of the rocks, yet we could not see them.

It was a place of darkness and, maybe, of death. There was movement around us, yet we cringed in a world of silence save for ear-drums ringing with oxygen-helium pressure inside our diving suits—the same intense pressure that made ankles and wrists tingle unbearably and bloodshot eyeballs feel as though they were being forced from our heads.

Beyond the submarine jungle, eight hundred feet down, lay a towering city of coral, built by no human hands, upon a three-mile shelf of rock which ended abruptly at the brink of a fathomless abyss—a vast, water-filled cleft in the ocean bed, where unspeakable creatures lived in perpetual darkness under a weight of water sufficient to crush malachite boulders.

Upon most inhabited worlds possessing animals that exist by land or by sea, a certain ordered existence can be laid down. On one hand is the life of atmospheric land; on the other, life of the water—both alien to one another and unable to survive wholly in the opposing element. Save for shore-line scrimmages with amphibians, therefore, each keeps to its respective sphere and lives in comparative peace.

Yet hitherto, in our wanderings on many globes, it has always been air-breathing bodies who develop superior intelligence and build up civilisations of sorts. Only upon this one incredible planet of Zello had we encountered such situations reversed—a superficially serene and smiling globe clothed with green, waving forests and blue seas, but which spawned in the depths of its waters a strange, fantastically evil community.

And as we lived away those awful, dragging minutes hidden in the submarine forest, I thought of the casual, light-hearted way it all started.

I was in my room aboard the ship, with my eyes aching so much from staring into the microscope classifying inter-cellular plant types for the main laboratory that young Hartnell's arrival provided a welcome interruption. At first that was. Later I changed my mind.

"Why, hello," I said, hospitably. "What's new?"

He didn't answer immediately, but stared fixedly at the opposite bulkhead with an absent-minded, faintly-smiling expression that made me rather uneasy. I'd seen that sort of look on Hartnell's face before, and it always meant he was busy with some hare-brained scheme or other.

Yet how could he get into mischief out here with Inter-planetary Exploration Bureau space-ship No. 2213, nearly a hundred million miles from the system of Eta Herculis? We'd done our job of tabulating useful planets for more thorough investigation by specialist squads later—except for one they'd proved an uninteresting lot—and now the great ship turned her nose towards headquarters again, accelerating through long, weary days to her cruising speed of around 23,000 miles a second, while most of us lay in the compression hammocks feeling deathly space-sick.

Respite came at prescribed intervals, when the atomic motors were throttled down and we were all expected to work. Inter-X vessels are run according to strict and

elaborate regulations—some completely incomprehensible, others boiling down to straightforward common sense. Although Hartnell and Tubby sometimes complain bitterly, there is obvious inefficiency in allowing field squads to remain idle throughout months of inter-stellar voyaging. Moreover, that way lies space-madness, with its warning symptoms of dizziness and depression. Duties are allotted, therefore, to divert men's minds from monotony and also to give Inter-X a measure of economic return for the salaries they pay.

My job in the ship consists, as a logical consequence, of being a botanist in the landing squads, of preliminary classification work on plant specimens collected during various expeditions—usually only small lichen and fungi—for the main laboratory. The first day of such activity periods usually proves fairly hectic, because research workers are clamouring for something to get busy on and old Steinbeck, the chief botanist, has quite a rough edge to his tongue if proceedings are delayed. So I had rushed through for them a full two dozen specimens, together with technical notes for guidance, and felt pretty well exhausted by the time Hartnell arrived.

He sat silent for several minutes while I grew more and more suspicious.

At last he spoke. "Know anything about fish, Pop?"

I looked at the question from all angles, failing to perceive any trap, even though I felt sure one must be there. "Fish?" I said, cautiously. "Not much. Why?"

He brooded again. I coughed once or twice and fidgeted rather impatiently with the microscope, but he took no notice.

Tubby Goss, the plump, solemn-faced photographer who forms the third member of our field squad, put his head round the door and I sighed, knowing further work to be impossible.

Hartnell remained lost in thought.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Tubby, curiously.

I shrugged. "Search me. He came in a few minutes ago and asked if I knew anything about fish. Since then he's just been sitting there."

"Could you help him?"

I shook my head.

Tubby fingered his plump chin thoughtfully and said: "It's a question of getting a long pole, with a piece of thin twine and a hook. You bait the hook, wait till they bite, then pull 'em out. Very nice fried in batter—"

Hartnell swung round on us with an expression that froze my grin into a smile of foolish concern. "It isn't funny!" His lean, brown face might have been carved from a chunk of granite. "They've lost a peeper!"

His clamped lips opened to drop a further sentence into the appalled hush. "And five men with her!"

"But—but darn it," said Tubby, "we're on our way home. There aren't any peepers out!"

The word "peeper" is spacemen's slang for scout vessels, six of which lie nose to tail in great launching bays along the ship's keel. Inter-X drill for exploring a planetary system is to despatch peepers for a closer look at any globe deemed worthy of a visit after spectroscopic and telescopic examination, while the parent ship—our own, officially No. 2213, is affectionately known as *Old Growler* because of a peculiar noise from her gravity-retractors—cruises in a convenient orbit, receiving radio reports and issuing whatever instructions may be necessary. Peepers carry field squads varying in number according to the work likely to be encountered.

Hot, young worlds wreathed in smoke from leaping volcanoes, for instance, need merely photographic records from a distance without landing; ancient globes covered in frozen methane may be similarly treated. An apparently bare

planet nevertheless receives attention from geologists to test its rocks for valuable minerals, as well as botanists to search craters and crannies after lichens, fungi or algae.

But much more elaborate treatment is accorded a world exhibiting vegetation, for plants usually indicate the presence of animal life, and occasionally *Old Growler* herself honours such globes with a landing, whereupon the surface is divided into zones and field squads despatched to explore their allotted areas.

And yet, as Tubby said, we had finished with Eta Herculis and were on our way home. How could a peeper have come to disaster?

"It was a fortnight ago," said Hartnell, sombrely. "That's the worst of a big ship—nobody knows half the things that go on."

"They usually post a notice on the bulletin board—"

He shook his head. "Not this time. Believe me, they're worried—"

"I don't blame 'em!"

He waved a hand, rather irritably. "Not so much about losing the ship—as the way it happened!"

We stared at him in mounting apprehension. "How—?"

"I don't know all the details—it's quite a hush-hush affair—"

He might have wandered round and round the subject all the way from Andromeda to Procyon. I moved across and said firmly, "Where? And what was a peeper doing away from the ship when we're on our way home?"

Young Hartnell looked at me in surprise. "Didn't you know, Pop? We aren't on our way home—not any longer!"

"Perhaps," said Tubby, patiently, "you'll tell us why we've been accelerating for the past ten days—"

"Turning, too," I put in. What reason had there been, I wondered, for all those steering changes unless to avoid the cosmic debris inevitably associated with a planetary system?

"Because," explained Hartnell, "we're swinging round the orbits to make a rendezvous. Wilkinson broke his leg, you remember, and Darrel's in hospital with fever—"

I sighed. It seemed as clear as a jarful of Frakkan swamp-mud. "So—?"

"So they haven't got another top-ranking marine zoologist on board and they're rushing somebody from Kepitalon III in a Q-ship."

Tubby, suitably impressed, raised his eyebrows. "They don't use Q-ships for nothing—"

I snapped my fingers with sudden inspiration. "Fish!"

Tubby nodded in gloomy satisfaction.

Young Hartnell seemed surprised that we hadn't understood from the very first. "Why else would they want a marine zoologist?"

Needless to say, this wasn't the end of the matter. "All we need to know now," I said, with commendable restraint, "is what fish have got to do with that peeper being lost."

Once more he stared at the bulkhead. "It dived into the sea on Zello. Something queer happened just before the crash. Beneath the surface they could see something they called a city, with a lot of fishes or underwater animals streaming in and out—"

Loudspeakers cut across the conversation, barking staccato instructions. "Fourth-degree turning begins in two minutes. Davitt routine applicable immediately. Repeat—fourth-degree turning begins in two minutes."

"Again!" said Tubby, disgustedly, making for the door in a hurry. "Just as I've got my infra-red timing gear to pieces! I only came along here to borrow some cigarettes."

I commenced to stow microscope and specimens in the Davitt locker, for centrifugal and centripetal forces are inclined to scatter loose articles all over the place when the

steering engines fire. At least I had a ready-made excuse for not doing any more work.

I stretched in the safety hammock and fixed my belt. Soon I knew the peculiar, tingling sensation of space-turning, but despite this, coupled with wondering reflections concerning a crashed peeper and an under-sea city, I started to yawn and dropped off to sleep.

I heard the loudspeakers saying something about Hartnell reporting to Room 847, but didn't take much notice.

The ship seemed to be bucking violently. Some heavy article must have fallen and pinned me by the right shoulder, for each violent oscillation pressed it painfully, swinging my entire body to and fro.

I opened my eyes, only to find myself still in the safety hammock, with Tubby shaking me awake.

"Room 847!" he said, urgently. "Didn't you hear the loudspeaker instructions to report there?"

I snapped the belt and swung my feet over in sudden panic. "I was rather tired—I remember Hartnell's name—who's in Room 847?"

He ran for the lift. I followed, struggling into my tunic, at the same time searching my conscience. Fortunately, I found it reasonably clear.

We pounded along Corridor J, eternally-burning Comis lights reflecting dully on its white paint. A neatly written panel on the door of No. 847 read "Personnel Superintendent." My heart sank. No one was ever summoned to the Personnel Superintendent's office except to receive official reprimand.

"Just made it!" gasped Tubby, glancing at the corridor clock. "At least we shan't get another ticking-off for being late!"

"There are times when it's very comforting to have friends," I told him, by way of thanks.

When we entered it seemed that preparations were in hand for disciplinary measures en masse. Hartnell stood before the superintendent's desk in company with two other men whom I did not know. We joined them and stood in attitudes of respectful attention, fearing the worst.

"You've been summoned to this office," began the superintendent, "in order to disguise the operational nature of your mission. No word of what transpires here must be repeated. Is that understood, gentlemen?"

I hadn't the faintest idea what he was talking about, but at least he'd called us gentlemen, so our reputations couldn't be as black as all that. I began to breathe more easily. Unless, of course, he was being sarcastic?

"Beyond these cautionary remarks, I don't propose to take any further part in the proceedings. You will be briefed by a representative from the Scientific Panel."

He gestured towards a dark, hard-faced man watching from the background, whereupon this individual confronted us across the desk and looked from one to the other with cold eyes.

"My name," he said, in clipped, metallic phrases, "is Toombes. The Scientific Panel directs me to express its appreciation that you should have volunteered for this rather hazardous trip, especially the three on whom the actual exploration work will fall."

Volunteered? Had I heard aright? I stole a glance at Hartnell from the corner of my eye, but his expression showed nothing save polite interest in the bouquets that were being handed out.

"The Scientific Panel understand," went on Toombes, with a note of disapproval, "that rumours are beginning to circulate in the ship. You will neither confirm nor deny such reports from anything you see or hear in this room. A statement will be issued at the appropriate time. The facts of the matter are that—"

And in flat, unemotional tones we heard how Scout Ship No. 46E had been deputed to land a party on Zello, fifth planet in the system of Eta Herculis, after long-distance photography had detected certain peculiar features among the oceans occupying three-quarters of the globe's surface. Vast, forest-covered mountains and jungle-clad plains spread across the land areas, with the result that a lot of work was likely to be entailed. Consequently, examination of the seas had been allotted to Ship 46E, while a further crew in Ship 46B explored Zello's tangled vegetation. Among ourselves we knew these two peepers better as *Helga*—named after a popular hostess in one of the better-class Z-bars—and *Little Growler*. Nicknames are far more comfortable than dull, official numbers.

The two ships, in constant radio communication, entered the fringe of Zello's atmosphere. More than a hundred miles up, *Little Growler* waited to see *Helga* land safely on a pre-selected spot near the beach.

"Fortunately," said Toombes, "we have a complete visual and aural account of what occurred. If you gather round this screen you will see a synchronised film and radio recording made aboard 46B as soon as it became obvious that something untoward was happening. I will switch on now."

A viewing table flashed into animation, spreading before our eyes an expanse of impenetrable, dark-green Zellian jungle, fringed with blinding white where it met the deep-blue sea. Across the waters, depicted in crystal-clear detail by powerful telescopic photo-lenses, sped *Helga*, crimson jets of atomic hydrogen spurting from her braking engines. She remained in lateral flight, apparently making no preparations to swing down for tail-landing technique.

"Hello, 46B. We can see a peculiar construction, apparently on the sea-bed. Propose flying over area again to confirm." An amplifier brought us the voice of a man

now dead—an observer aboard the *Helga*—so that the scene became re-created exactly as it had been witnessed aboard *Little Growler*.

"Hello, 46E. Message received."

Now it became obvious why the *Helga* delayed landing. She swung across the white fringe of sand and circled above the jungle for a new observation run.

Next time the voice contained undertones of excitement and delight. "It's true! It's true, I tell you! We can see the buildings quite clearly!"

"Probably inundated ruins," said *Little Growler*, unenthusiastically.

Helga waxed sarcastic. "With traffic in the streets?"

"Traffic?"

"Something's moving in orderly lines between the buildings—I can't quite make out what—we're travelling too fast—"

Again the ship on the screen circled.

"We're coming in again now—wait—yes, there it is! Straight ahead I can see—" The voice tailed off, only to resume in a weak, dazed manner. "Straight ahead of us—"

A confused, awful murmuring sounded in the background. I could have sworn that the peeper somehow swerved momentarily in her even flight, but next instant she was circling normally above the trees.

"Hello, 46E," called *Little Growler*, urgently. "Hello, 46E. What happened?"

"It's all right—I don't know—we're taking another look. Here it comes now—" The ship had reached the sea again. "I can just make out—"

The voice faltered yet a second time. I felt myself breaking into gentle perspiration.

Then the amplifier said "Oh!" in a tone so low and horrible and long-drawn-out that my scalp crawled. In my most macabre imaginings I would never have believed

that the human voice could acquire such accents of sheer, unadulterated terror.

"O-o-oh!" It was the half-breathed exclamation of a man suddenly scared beyond endurance, but before fear completely paralysed his vocal chords he choked out his mystification. "Why do . . . we feel . . . so . . . afraid? Khama? But there's nothing . . . nothing here . . ."

"What's happening?" called *Little Growler* again. "Hello, 46E. We are not receiving you—"

The dreadful murmuring which had resumed rose to a dull crescendo, then died out, and simultaneously the ship dived seawards.

Two or three voices said "Khama . . . yes, that's it . . . Khama . . ." Then they, too, faded.

An awful, chilling silence. I wanted to tear my morbidly fascinated gaze from the screen and see whether others shared my horror—whether Toombes' set, official countenance showed any change of expression at the sight of five men hurtling to their deaths in the grip of invisible, inexplicable panic.

"Hello, 46E. Hello, 46E. Is your ship out of control? Can we help? We are not receiving you. Why don't you answer?"

The amplifiers kept croaking out those grisly syllables while catastrophe on the screen moved swiftly towards its climax.

Once again I thought I heard muttered repetition of "Khama . . . Khama . . . we're coming. Khama . . ."

Without a further word, Scout Ship No. 46E hit the sea in a gigantic fountain of dazzling white spray and disappeared. For a moment the blue waters surged and boiled, emitting clouds of steam that hung a while in the hot, clear air. Then all was still.

Toombes switched off the record. So far as I could see he hadn't turned a hair. On his extended sleeve I sud-

denly became aware of three gold stars. My eyes almost popped from my head. I didn't know Inter-X officers went as high as that. Even the Personnel Superintendent boasted only two silver bars.

"Ship 46B quite correctly reported the occurrence to us immediately," said Toombes. "We instructed her to return and the crew were sworn to silence." He paused, turning his strangely compelling eyes upon each of us in turn. "Frankly, no one knows what happened inside 46E. The Scientific Panel has studied this record you have just seen. They are convinced that events were affected by peculiar activities on the sea-bed—possibly harmful radiations of some kind, insofar as the ship apparently flew normally while traversing land areas."

I had to bite back an inquiry about those mysterious references to "Khama"—and next moment I was glad I'd done so, because the experts wouldn't miss so obvious a clue as that.

"The word 'Khama,'" went on Toombes, "remains unexplained. Artificially induced hallucinations have been mentioned—" I gathered his personal opinion regarded this as far-fetched, but that his duty was to acquaint us with all theories, "—yet no confirmation is possible without further investigation. Ray projections emitted deliberately from the sea-bed indicate intelligence—and intelligent under-water creatures have not so far been encountered on any planet. The Scientific Panel is, quite naturally, very interested."

This, of course, was the cold, dry, official way of putting things. As Hartnell said later, what Toombes really meant was that they were sufficiently alarmed in high places to be running round in circles biting pieces out of the furniture.

"Therefore, a further expedition has been ordered, supported by the best possible advice. Unfortunately, most of

our diving equipment was lost with the ship, but Dr. Lambert, a distinguished marine zoologist, has been contacted on Kepitalon III and given the fastest possible transportation. Rendezvous is 0630 tomorrow. With a minimum of lost time, Dr. Lambert will accompany you to Zello for first-hand inquiries, which will be carried out with the utmost precautions."

His cold, grey eyes travelled slowly across our faces once more. "That is all for the moment. Remember—nothing you have heard in this room is to be repeated. You will not even admit that this interview has taken place. To relieve suspicion in the event of a direct challenge you are authorised to say you were called here for the purpose of receiving a third-grade reprimand following your expedition to Graddos. The charge is misusing official equipment, in that you employed electronic counter-meters to settle wagers among yourselves concerning the degree of radio-activity in certain geological specimens."

Despite being so dumbfounded, I could have sworn the corners of his rat-trap mouth eased themselves for a split-second. "I suppose you didn't think the Disciplinary Police could get to know about such things, eh?" His face hardened again. "Very well—dismissed."

We tottered into the corridor and back to our quarters.

Tubby was first to speak. "Toomes!" he said, in a low, reflective one. "What a name—very appropriate! And did you see those rank badges?"

I nodded. "I'm not bothering so much about him as how our names cropped up as volunteers." Young Hartnell's face was butter-smooth innocence under my suspicious glance. "It isn't the first time this has happened," I went on, darkly, "and I darned well want to know why! I'm a botanist, not a deep-sea diver! I haven't forgotten how you pulled me into that business on Zeton—"

"We all get bored and stale cooped up in the ship,"

said Hartnell, easily. "Nothing like a bit of variety now and again." He adopted a wounded air. "I thought I was doing you a good turn—getting you away from wading through all those cases of stuffy specimens. Besides, I've always wanted to meet intelligent fish—"

"You'll hardly have time for a handshake as you go past 'em if they treat us like they did the *Helga*." I paused, doubtfully. "I suppose it really was something to do with this under-sea city or whatever they saw that made 'em crash—"

Tubby, who had been brooding on other matters, said there was only one way for our harmless little pastime on Kolomos to have become known. "You told 'em!" he accused Hartnell. "You owe us both a week's pay and wanted to call it off officially!"

"Never entered my head!" protested young Hartnell, although rather half-heartedly. "You'll get your money all right—"

"We'd better," said Tubby.

"Only everything's got to be kept quiet, you know, and I thought I could give 'em a good excuse about why we were called to the superintendent's office."

I drew a deep breath. There didn't seem much point now in arguing. Even a botanist has his pride, and I didn't like the idea of asking humbly for my name to be taken off the list of volunteers. Which, of course, young Hartnell had known all along.

"All right," I said, wearily. "What now?"

Hartnell was frowning. "This chap Lambert—"

"What about him?"

"We'll have to carry him along with us. Who is he? What's he like? Has he ever done a job like this before?" He paced up and down the cabin, deep in thought, worrying out the problem. "You know, Pop, we're a team. We've been around together and we've dragged ourselves out of

some tight corners. Will he fit in?"

Tubby grunted. "Apparently he's got to fit in. You heard what Toombes said."

Hartnell waved a hand with more airiness than I could summon up. "Don't let his three little gold stars dazzle you. We're more use to Inter-X than any back-room zoologist with a long grey beard, and we'll stick together, come what may."

We mulled things over in silence for a time. Then Tubby, who seemed to be doing much more talking than usual, put his finger on a disturbing aspect of the situation that had so far escaped me.

"This under-water city," he said, wearing a worried expression. "If they lost the diving equipment in the *Helga*, how are we going to get down there?"

CHAPTER TWO

Enter—Dr. Levişon P. Lambert

I MAGINE two tiny motes floating in the sunbeams across some gigantic cathedral—there you have *Old Crowler* and the Q-ship, trying to rendezvous amid the star-strewn wastes beyond Eta Herculis. Three-dimensional navigation—or astrogation, as they now insist on calling it—always strikes me as a recurring miracle. Sailors of bygone centuries set their course by a star, sighted the coast and sailed along it to harbour; with compass and chronometer their successors achieved a much greater degree of accuracy, sometimes to within a few hundred yards of a channel-entrance. Add the complication of depth to such calculations while reducing permitted variation to a matter of inches instead of yards and you have a rough idea of the astrogrators' task.

Now let's forget such details as the fact that stars used by the old sailors aren't "fixed" for the spaceman, that even today we can't chart unexplained cosmic drifts, that fierce ether-storms loom continually across the path and that the dreaded "dark" stars—titanic masses of cold, meteoric iron—stretch out powerful magnetic tentacles to grip the incautious voyager. As I said, let's forget "details" like those and imagine we are travelling towards a certain planet, brightly reflecting the light from its sun and visible from many hundreds of millions of miles distant. In such an instance telescopic observation suffices almost by itself to guide a ship to her destination.

But suppose the target to be an invisible speck in the void—no eight or ten thousand-mile disc shining like some

bright beacon but a few hundred square yards of coromium-plated hull on some Q-ship. How do you reach it, then? Radar will register within five or six million miles, yet this margin is what young Hartnell describes as "spitting distance," compared with the total journey. The astrogator's job is done long before that small, round blob appears on his radar screen.

When I talk to Hartnell about such things he only laughs and mentions electronic computers, astro-physical trackers or automatic three-way course locators. Nevertheless, whatever mysterious gadgets assist our navigators, I never pass one of the crew in the corridors without mentally raising my cap in tribute to their skill.

And in the present instance not only were they confident of contacting the Q-ship within certain limits of space, but also prepared, as Toombes had said, to guarantee the time of arrival.

Although I hadn't the slightest business there, I found an excuse to call at the observation bridge at about the right time. Wearing an expression of baffled interest, I stared at the telescopic screen with such fascination that they couldn't help but take pity on me and explain it all in bewildering detail, thereby achieving the object with cool cheek equal to young Hartnell at his most audacious.

I let the flood of technicalities flow over my head and concentrated on the screen. Two tiny specks hung in a firmament filled with a billion billion other shimmering points which cast their light across uncharted intergalactical wastes. Yet by some magic of the telescopic electron screen this pair of minute reflections became easily distinguishable from the remainder. The senior observation officer spoke learnedly of "projected radar ions as against direct visual wavelengths," but I let it pass.

Nearly four million miles distant, one of *Old Growler's* peepers had almost achieved contact with the Q-ship.

They had begun careful manœuvres to coincide tangents and velocities more accurately, in order to pull alongside for the passenger to be transferred. Anyone who believes this to be a simple operation in the depths of space—without wasting an awful amount of time bringing both vessels to a crawl—ought to think again.

"Any idea who they're bringing here?" asked the senior observation officer, idly. He did it very well, because he must have been bursting with curiosity.

"Some grey-bearded boffin, they say, though why he's been sent for in such a devil of a hurry I haven't the faintest idea." Having told this downright untruth with what Hartnell described later as "the clear, innocent gaze of a little child when all the time a man of your years should have been thinking about the hereafter," I steered the conversation elsewhere in case dangerous inquiries might be renewed. "How will they get him across? Fix up a flexible air-lock between the ships?"

He looked at me rather pityingly. "Not unless the old boy wants to get here about three weeks late—"

I wondered, in that case, how the transfer might be achieved.

"Oh, they'll put him in a space suit and chuck him out for the peeper to pick up."

It seemed rather rough and high-handed treatment for a venerable scholar in whom the 'Scientific Panel' apparently placed great reliance, for a mere nobody would certainly not have been granted passage in a special Q-ship—the fastest and most modern craft of our times. The senior observation officer seemed quite cold-blooded about it, too.

But while we had been talking, the miles sped miraculously—even at *Old Growler's* present reduced velocity—and the image on the screen grew sufficiently large to see the squat, powerful outlines of the Q-ship. She was a vessel not exactly "built for speed," as they used to say

in the old days, but for quick acceleration and braking. Speed of itself means nothing in outer space—it can easily be built up to enormous figures, limited only by the danger of collision with wandering debris—but time on space journeys is wasted to a colossal extent by the need for acceleration and braking to be no more violent than the human frame can endure. Thus more time is often spent in “starting” and “stopping” than upon the actual journey.

The eye-piece telescope—as distinct from the more easily viewed screen—concentrated an image of startling clarity. I could see every detail, save for Dr. Levison P. Lambert being up-ended without dignity through an exit port. However, this had apparently already been done, for a loudspeaker switched in to report the concluding stages of the operation.

“Q-ship 164/3. Transfer of Dr. Lambert to Scout Ship 46C completed. Acceleration into return orbit begins in seven minutes. Acknowledge, please.”

“Ship 46C reports Dr. Lambert safely inboard. Acknowledgment herewith.”

The chatter of radio procedure crackled back and forth while one of *Old Growler's* controllers carefully checked the operation. His voice—reminiscent of Toombes' cold, official accents—applied the closure. “Inter-X ship 2213 requests Q-ship 164/3 to monitor this channel for announcement of Dr. Lambert's arrival. That is all.”

As Hartnell said afterwards, it wouldn't have done them any harm while the beam was on to let the radio boys talk informally among themselves for a little while in the hope that “old Joe Williamson who I knew on Menaspar” or “some so-and-so named Kelson who still owes me for the Saggiarius trip” might be with the Q-ship. Indeed, we could imagine the Q-ship crew being highly delighted by their journey, for none but Inter-X vessels usually approach within a couple of hundred million miles of these outer

boundaries of explored space. Inter-X authorities, however, work "by the book" and "unauthorised transmissions" are definitely frowned upon. Only one thing matters—collection of data to increase the sum of human knowledge.

So for the time being there remained nothing to do save await the doctor's arrival. I thanked the senior observation officer and went back to my own quarters, where Hartnell and Tubby stretched themselves at ease.

"They've dragged him aboard the peeper," I said. "He'll be here before long." I regarded them distastefully. "And now if you two young devils can gather strength enough to get off my bed and shut the door behind you I'd like to get some sleep."

"Khama," said Hartnell, reflectively. "I wonder just who—or what—it is."

"At the moment," I said, although later I was to shudder at dismissing the matter so lightly, "I couldn't care less. I'm going to catch a couple of hours' sleep. Maybe I'll need it before long."

Tubby, pausing at the door, stared at me appraisingly. "You psychic or something, Pop?"

As it turned out, I was.

Young Hartnell came in excitedly to announce the doctor's arrival. "They whipped him through the stern space-port and straight up to the Scientific Panel without anybody seeing him."

I yawned. "How do you know he's here, then?"

A remark like that might shake some people, but not Hartnell. He came straight back with a challenging question. "For that matter, how could I have told you about the *Helga* being lost? Take it from me, Pop, the old boy's up there—" he didn't mean heaven but the sacred quarters high in the ship where our guiding geniuses con-

gregated—"have got pretty good reasons for keeping this affair hush-hush." He gestured rather impatiently. "Wish I could have caught a glimpse of the old buzzard, though. I'd like to know what sort of broken-down greybeard we're supposed to wet-nurse."

Tubby guffawed. "Considering where we're going you've got the right word there!"

Personally, I thought the comment in rather poor taste. The more I pondered on the fix young Hartnell had thrust me into the less I like it.

Much as *Old Growler's* high-ranking officials wished to keep secret the proposed expedition to Zello, too many people were concerned. As Toombes had told us, rumours were sweeping the ship. Soon they crystallised into a reasonably accurate outline of the situation, and before long, obeying his injunction not to talk, the three of us felt like conspirators in cloaks and sinister, befeathered hats, furtively dodging everybody who might ask awkward questions. Tubby and I, unfortunately, weren't sufficiently poker-faced, but Hartnell time after time turned upon inquisitors such an expression of bland ignorance that they retired in some confusion.

However, there were (1) *Little Grower's* personnel, (2) radio operators on duty in the parent ship at the time of the disaster, (3) registrars upon whom fell the painful duty of writing off the *Helga* and her crew, (4) maintenance squads preparing *Little Growler* for the return visit, (5) stewards and transport men who knew of Dr. Lambert's presence aboard, (6) technicians engaged in modifying space suits for diving operations, (7) records clerks finding themselves repeatedly asked for files concerning marine life and under-water geology.

Not that any of them actually talked, any more than—I hope—we did, yet with several hundred intelligent and inquisitive men diligently collecting and analysing crumbs

of information it couldn't be long before a rough sketch of the situation emerged. Soon everyone in the ship knew that the *Helga* had been lost and that another expedition, supported by a mysterious expert from Kepitalon III, was in preparation to find out the reason.

It was, in fact, one of the maintenance electricians fitting extra Comis lights in Corridor H who told me that space suits were to be used for diving.

I passed on the information to Hartnell.

He laughed. "That'll teach old Lambert what Inter-X squads have to put up with! Fit him into a space suit—"

"He's already been in one. They shoved him from the Q-ship—remember?"

He waved away this reminder as trifling. "I meant for four or five hours of brisk work-out—not just a pleasant half-hour floating free and doing nothing. Get his arms and legs aching nicely, with the suit good and stifling, and he'll wish himself back on Kepitalon III with his little jars of tadpoles—"

To a certain extent I could understand Hartnell's hostility towards the visiting scientist. The three of us had been together sufficiently long for a definite comradeship to have developed, and any fourth party must of necessity seem an intruder, to be regarded with suspicion until he had proved his worth. Besides, in ticklish circumstances the presence of some untrained individual might well enhance danger.

The Inter-X instruction manual, with typical official lack of imagination, lays down firmly that nothing—not even the lives of companions, if need be—must stand in the way of bringing back information. Not wishing to under-rate the intelligence of controllers, I wonder if they suspect how many times this regulation has been defied. We ourselves have deliberately disobeyed its cold-blooded provisions on several occasions, and no doubt others will

do so in the future, so long as human comradeship and affection survive. But what view might the unknown Dr. Lambert hold? Would he, in emergency, sacrifice one of us for the sake of a rule-book? And this was the man whom we were destined to accompany to an alien civilisation at the bottom of an uncharted sea on an unexplored planet.

"You're looking a bit glum, Pop," said Tubby. "Anything the matter?"

"Just pondering, that's all." I thought it best to change the subject. "Anybody on board know this Lambert?"

"Can't find a soul that's ever heard of him," said Hartnell. "Doesn't move in our circles, apparently. The lot upstairs are more his type, I imagine."

"These space suits," I said, doubtfully. "How far down do they expect us to go?"

"Toombes'll tell us when he thinks fit, I suppose. Anyway, it seems a good idea in emergency—"

And truth to tell, even though not particularly keen about the fantastic affair young Hartnell had arranged, I offered a certain grudging admiration when two mechanics brought the suits for inspection.

To understand this particular ingenuity by Inter-X technicians, the difference between an atmosphere suit and a space suit must first be appreciated. The former are light, flexible affairs, possessing every imaginable gadget from food-tablets and drinking water to a gravity-reactor that "takes the weight off your feet" in conditions of exceptional exertion; there are inter-com and outside transmitting radio circuits, in addition to sound microphones and amplifiers; they contain sufficient oxygen for five days' normal use and the new Bergmann Mark VIII type is beautifully insulated against extremes of temperature. The thin, tough material is proof against all chemicals save fluorine gas—twelve hours is the limit of endurance in strong con-

centrations—and gives adequate protection in most ordinary conditions of radio-activity.

Space suits, on the other hand, are the heavy, cumbrous affairs that maintenance crews use for external repairs on ships in flight. Their material must provide insulation sufficient to protect the occupant from the frightening physical phenomena of the void. Or rather lack of phenomena, for between the worlds lies nothing—neither temperature nor pressure—nothing save the subtle, mysterious, intangible ether across which travel cosmic rays on their limitless journeys. These suits, then, must withstand fifteen pounds per square inch of air pressure inside and -293 degrees Centigrade of cold outside. In practice their safety limits aim at a margin of five times these figures.

Young Hartnell became quite enthusiastic about the modifications. All the "comforts" of a Bergman suit had been transplanted into our spacewear, even to the gravity reactor. And to combat the enormous "squeeze" of water in lower depths there was an automatically-regulated motor worked from the yttrium power-pack and reserve air reservoirs. Thus the suits could be kept inflated for diving to the utmost pressure a man could endure.

"Very nice indeed," said Hartnell, rubbing his hands gleefully. "They've even given us headlights." Obviously, he could hardly wait to try the things out. For my part, I could restrain impatience without much difficulty.

In the middle of his gloating, the loudspeakers came into action again. "Room 847—undermentioned personnel report immediately to Room 847—"

Tubby drew a deep breath. "At last! Wonder if we'll meet this old goat—"

When we reached the office, however, none was present save ourselves and Toombes. Even the Personnel Superintendent had apparently been kicked out temporarily.

Toombes didn't waste any time. His eyes—described

privately by Hartnell as a couple of cold, boiled bullets—raked us expressionlessly and as soon as we were standing in a line near the desk, accompanied by two spacemen detailed to handle the peeper on the journey, he began the briefing.

"This ship is now travelling on a course some millions of miles outside the orbit of Zello and overhauling the planet fairly rapidly. Scout Ship 46B will be launched soon after 1400 hours Solard Standard Rating. Initial speed, plus slight deflectional alignment, should allow a quick journey—probably no more than sixteen hours." He waved a hand, rather impatiently. "The navigation section will give you full details. Once over Zello the ship will, as far as possible, avoid land areas for reasons I shall soon make clear. Kindly examine this map—"

Behind the scenes a lot of people had been very busy. Not only were suits prepared and the whole fantastic range of submarine biology reviewed for possible information, but a stab of Toombes' finger on a switch illuminated a large wall map showing an area of about a hundred miles radius round the spot where the *Helga* vanished. I had no difficulty in recognising the conformation of the coastline after seeing that dreadful film record of the ship's fate.

"You will move into this sector from an almost vertical approach. Communication must be maintained with this ship according to orders you will be given. A repeater station for the purpose has been established in Scout Ship 46B. Controller's orders must be obeyed implicitly." Such instructions usually were, of course, but I thought his eyes grew flintier. Only his exalted official position must have stopped him from adding a warning to the effect that "I've heard about you three before!" Instead, he said: "There is no room for individual initiative." He looked hard at young Hartnell, whose face again wore that expression of

angelic innocence I had learned to distrust so thoroughly.

A buzzer sounded somewhere and a red light flickered over an inter-com box on the desk.

Toombes leaned towards it, his three gold stars twinkling. "Yes?" We stood respectfully silent during the pause. "Certainly, doctor. They are here now. Perhaps you would be good enough to come to this office."

He turned to us again. "In a moment you will meet Dr. Levison P. Lambert, who is to accompany you."

We waited. I wondered if Hartnell might try to pass the time with a little light badinage, but even he seemed sufficiently impressed by Toombes' rank to keep his mouth shut.

A door at the back of the room opened.

"Ah," said Toombes, swinging round. "Here you are, doctor. These are the gentlemen who will accompany you on the expedition. Immediately after landing near the beach—"

The rest of the words fell on completely deaf ears. After the first shock of dazed comprehension I wondered whether my own eyes popped out so ridiculously with astonishment as those of Hartnell, Tubby and the two crew men.

For Dr. Lambert, who had been flown so hurriedly from Kepitalon III to provide specialist advice on marine biology, was a girl!

CHAPTER THREE

The Graveyard on the Foreshore

A PART from her distinguished academic qualifications, Dr. Levison P. Lambert possessed the added attraction of being strikingly good looking. She had a rather pale, oval face framed in raven-black hair, and her cool, grey eyes smiled a pleasant acknowledgment of the introduction.

Quite calmly and agreeably, she looked from one to the other of us and said "How do you do," after the fashion of any nicely-brought-up girl. Astonishment garbled the replied of five bewildered men into low, impolite growls.

Biggest wonder of all, perhaps, was the way young Hartnell succeeded in bottling up his feelings until we'd returned to quarters. He then proceeded to beat his forehead violently with clenched fists and shouted, "It's unheard of! An Inter-X landing party's no place for a girl!"

I thought of some strange places into which duty had led us and mentally agreed.

Tubby, too, took it calmly. He just sighed. "Makes you wonder what women are coming to these days—" Had he only known, he was merely echoing sentiments of despair which have rung down the centuries. He shook his head sorrowfully and followed with another platitude: "What'll they get up to next?"

"I won't let 'em do it!" cried Hartnell. "Why—a girl as pretty as that—it's criminal! I'll—I'll resign first!"

For a moment I thought he meant what he said, and I perked up a little at the prospect of escaping a visit to

Zello. He was only blowing off steam, though, and started looking up technical details about marine creatures for the purpose of springing them suddenly on Dr. Lambert. "Because," he said, "nobody's going to tell me, either, that a girl who could knock spots off any Z-bar queen for looks is a genuine, honest-to-goodness doctor of zoology."

This phase, in turn, didn't last long, however. Tubby and I merely sat there brooding quietly and the next we knew was Hartnell staring at the bulkhead again and muttering something about "whether 'P' stood for Priscilla or Pauline."

"What you want to do," said Tubby, rather brusquely, "is to keep your mind on your work!"

I held my own views to myself and watched Hartnell's reactions. He kept mumbling despondently that he "didn't like the idea at all," and then confessed openly his anxiety for the girl's safety.

When it suits his purpose, young Hartnell can be extremely persuasive. The way he raised the matter with Toombes at our final briefing was a minor masterpiece of diplomacy. He touched lightly on the loss to science generally in the event of one with Dr. Lambert's valuable qualifications coming to grief and said that while other members of the expedition appreciated their superior officer's consideration in providing this extra safety factor, we were sufficiently experienced to accomplish the journey without mishap.

"We feel, sir," he concluded, "that it's unnecessary to risk the loss of Dr. Lambert's specialised knowledge for the sake of a field squad's life and limb, even though we appreciate the gesture."

For the first time Toombes exhibited emotion. His left eyebrow raised itself at least a couple of millimetres and he said: "You seem to be under some misapprehension.

Dr. Lambert's presence has nothing to do with your security. She is being sent to Zello for the same purpose as yourselves—that is, bringing back information, which must be done regardless of losses among personnel."

Hartnell reddened right up the back of his neck and said: "Oh, I see," in a very small, subdued voice.

The attractive Dr. Lambert, seized with a sudden fit of pretended coughing, turned away and pressed a handkerchief to her mouth. But I had seen how, while Hartnell was speaking, her initial expression of indignation slowly changed to one of warm appreciation of the gesture he had tried to make. I hope the admittedly difficult task of an Inter-X landing party wasn't going to be made more involved by romantic complications.

We had no chance of further conversation with her, however, until the journey began. Although no one took us into his confidence, we guessed she was being kept busy by the Scientific Panel while they checked theories and devised tactics on the expedition's behalf. Moreover, we had plenty to do while powerful repulsor mechanisms in the great ship's launching bays pushed *Little Growler* clear, and afterwards it seemed that various urgent duties required our attention.

Then, almost before we realised the fact, we were looking down once more on a too-familiar section of Zello landscape, seeing it swell as though drawn upon the surface of an inflating balloon. The effect was due to *Little Growler's* rapid approach, and through the loudspeakers sounded the voice of Willson, who was piloting. "Check safety-belts. I'm going to swing her in."

There have been doddering theorists in the past who emphasised that at a certain point beyond a planet's surface there is no "up" or "down" or "sideways." They ought to try it sometime when a ship swings in for a tail-landing.

Over we went, with the blood pounding in our temples and the vessel's structure creaking ominously against terrific stresses—round in a throbbing arc on our own centre of gravity until *Little Growler* dropped tail first almost vertically towards the great, green forests.

The screen automatically cut out, only to project the identical view a few minutes later from the rear scanners. Next instant the picture had vanished again in clouds of atomic hydrogen flame from braking motors.

"Khama . . . we're coming, Khama . . ."

I could hear again those grotesque sentences gasped by the crew of the *Helga*. My hand gripped a corner of the seat so fiercely that the skin tore. There was a great roaring in my ears that could have meant anything. As it happened, the noise was caused by landing jets reaching full blast and next second *Little Growler* settled with scarcely a jar upon a blackened mass of scorched and stinking vegetation which had once formed part of Zello's virgin jungles.

Five people—myself among them—relaxed with audible sighs. No doubt the sixth member of the crew—a radio engineer named Markeson, who had spent the voyage checking his equipment in the rear compartment—did likewise. We'd arrived.

"Nice work, young Willson," said Hartnell. "Couldn't have done it better myself." He can be insufferable at times, but having handled *Little Growler* on occasions he fancies himself as a pilot.

Before Willson could frame any cutting retort, I kept harmony by suggesting the controller would want to hear from us again. ★

"Scout Ship 46B reporting satisfactory landing on Zello."

"State your position."

That was the only greeting we got, of course—just a straightforward, matter-of-fact order. It was always the

same with controllers. Popular view among spacemen is that they use freezing fluid for blood. No matter what hair-raising item may be subject of a report, anybody could just as well be talking to a robot.

Whether it's sheer laziness, or whether Hartnell and Tubby secretly stand in awe of controllers I don't know, but the job of spokesman is usually thrust on me. Their excuse is that my more mature years and wider experience of profanity allow me to handle the task better. That, of course, is complete nonsense. No one in his right mind talks back to controllers, all of whom are definitely cast in the Toombes' mould. Or if he does, he doesn't do it twice.

"Map reference JM8664339."

"Wait."

Hartnell grunted. "What now, I wonder?"

I imagined the controller to be reporting to higher authorities, who would most likely complain that we were too near the beach, which we had been ordered to avoid. Or, alternatively, that we were too far away. Both these matters were really Willson's headache, but as spokesman I'd have to provide quick excuses.

However, the powers-that-be kindly restrained any criticism and proceeded to the next stage. "State what action is proposed."

"It is suggested that two members of the expedition make preliminary reconnaissance of the shore-line."

Again it came. "Wait."

We waited.

"Approved. Members concerned must wear atmosphere suits and maintain constant radio communication with their ship. Conversation will be recorded. Report again at 15.30 hours, or on emergency frequency as necessary. That is all."

Patricia Lambert—Hartnell's guess about her name had

been wide of the mark—followed these manœuvres with amused interest. “To think I came all the way from Kepitalon III to get away from red tape—”

I tut-tutted sympathetically. “You get it there, too! Inter-X isn’t always like this, though. On the present job we’re more under the controller’s thumb than usual.” I regarded her with additional interest. Dislike of rules and regulations—although at the same time observing them when necessary—forms one of the major solidarities of Inter-X personnel, and if this pert, attractive Dr. Lambert felt the same way we had at least something in common.

“Well,” said Hartnell, “I suggest Pop and myself have the first look round.”

I opened my mouth to say “Why me?” but caught the girl’s eye and closed it in time.

Zello’s atmosphere was breathable, although rather warm and without overmuch oxygen. On the whole, the controller had been wise to specify atmosphere suits.

We climbed from the lower exit port and dropped lightly into the sodden, charred vegetation of the landing place.

The undergrowth proved not unduly dense, and we were able to carve a path without much difficulty. Some of the leaf formations on various shrubs and trailing vines were particularly interesting, but Hartnell said this wasn’t a botanical trip and I’d have to restrain my natural enthusiasm for brachiate monocotyledons. (As a matter of fact, the plants I looked at were nothing of the kind, but Hartnell picks up bits of technical jargon while scavenging through encyclopædias and likes to show off.)

Vegetation ended almost abruptly as we breasted a ridge, giving way to sand dunes. Nowhere was there manifestations of animal life—neither bird nor flying insect in the warm air, neither beetle nor creeping thing amid the close-packed growth on which we trod.

At the top of the rise we paused, looking out to the clear, blue sea, spattered with diamond-sharp points of reflection. Tufts of coarse, wide-bladed grass speared themselves here and there through the dry sand where we slid and stumbled. It might have been any of a thousand beaches on a thousand different worlds—yet beneath that cool, tranquil ocean there existed active, intelligent life in a form we had so far not encountered.

I looked at that calm expanse and shuddered. Could there lie under its deceptive serenity a malevolent influence which had dragged the *Helga* to destruction? And if so, was it possible that our own approach escaped the notice of so powerful an organisation?

Hartnell grabbed my arm so suddenly that I almost jumped out of the suit. "Look, Pop! What's that? Along there to the left?"

We stood on a spur of the dunes, looking into a bay adjoining that where the *Helga* crashed. As far as the eye could see there extended, mingled confusedly with the light-coloured sand, great heaps of white, tangled objects.

Our eyebrows asked a mutual question. Hartnell answered it. "Suppose we'd better go and see, eh?"

I called the ship and announced what was proposed. Tubby's voice held undertones of anxiety. "Be careful, Pop—"

"Don't worry," I said, grimly. "We will!"

No movement was visible among the strange masses of twisted material. We skirted the nearest heap cautiously.

"Perishing Procyon!" said Hartnell. "What is it?"

I drew a deep breath. "Looks like bones—"

"Bones?"

Various pieces in the conglomeration of osseous material showed identical formation. "Probably all of the same species."

Very gingerly, Hartnell disengaged specimens and scru-

tinised them closely. When he'd finished he wasn't much wiser.

"But why—why are they here? And where'd they come from?"

I glanced round nervously. "Wish I knew. One thing's certain—"

"Oh?"

"Whether this sea's inhabited or not, animal life of sorts exists on the land—otherwise there'd be bodies, not just bones."

He whistled softly. "Of course. Unless they've merely rotted away—"

"Not necessarily large animals—ants, perhaps. Or beetles. Or worms."

I tried to measure one of the strange skeletons with my eye, but the heaped confusion was so great that I had to give up.

In the next instant something so amazing happened that even now I can clearly recall the fantastic way we both dived panic-stricken for cover behind clumps of coarse grass.

A great splashing, swirling and foaming started about twenty yards out and from the centre of this whirlpool emerged a large, black body that leaped into the air in a perfect parabola to descend with a noisy, crackling sound upon the serried heaps of bones. Having landed, it did not move again and the disturbed waters gradually subsided.

"Now what in Andromeda—?"

We waited for further manifestations, but they did not materialise.

"You all right?" asked Tubby from the ship.

"Everything under control," said Hartnell. "But they've started throwing things at us!"

"What?" I could imagine eyes like saucers in his plump face.

"Just Hartnell's little joke," I said, hurriedly.

Tubby's exclamation was a masterpiece of opinion expressed without words. "What a sense of humour," he added, disgustedly. "And don't forget this conversation's being recorded."

I groaned in spirit, wondering what Toombes would think when our light-hearted badinage poured into his ears.

The thing that had emerged from the water remained motionless upon its uncomfortable couch. Examining the eight-foot object from a respectable distance, we found that it certainly appeared fish-like in general outline—so far as streamlining of body and presence of fin-shaped projections were concerned—but the head resembled nothing we had so far seen. It had a mouth of sorts, yet no visible eyes, snout or gills. And it was undoubtedly quite dead.

"But if it's dead," I said, puzzled, "how could it jump out of the water?"

Hartnell frowned in concentration. "You know, Pop, we're up against a topsy-turvy world this time—"

"Will the controllers be interested in idle speculation?" I asked, warningly, remembering the record.

He took no notice. "If it's true what the *Helga* saw, the 'people' of Zello live in the water—the ocean's their world, just the same as land masses are our world." He gesticulated slightly, warming to his theme. "After all, what do we know about oceans? We skim the tops by fishing—but that's all. We can't reach the lower depths, so we conclude they're no use and leave 'em alone. I'd say that's just what Zello's people do to the land—they can't leave the water and so they don't bother about what goes on."

"Hm," I said, noncommittally.

"Now what do we do, Pop, if we're near the sea and want to throw anything away?"

I thought about this for a moment. "Chuck it in the water, I suppose."

"Right! And this lot—" he gestured across the blue, sparkling ocean, "—they chuck their debris on the land."

"But—but this isn't debris! Why it might even be one of their own people!"

He chuckled wickedly. "Ever heard of burials at sea?"

My eye travelled again along those apparently endless stacks of skeletons. The theory was ingenious, certainly. Beyond that I wasn't prepared to go. "What now?"

He shrugged. "Better get the diving suits and go down, I suppose. We certainly can't see anything from here—"

Yet a moment later we were destined to see quite enough to be going on with. Water swirled again near the shore—although not so violently this time—as something heaved and thrashed towards the sand. Simultaneously we dived for cover again. If more eight-foot fishes were due to be flung out it wouldn't be healthy to wait where they fell.

And then, before our pop-eyed gaze, there emerged from the troubled waters two strange, shapeless forms—shapeless, that was, save for bubble-shaped, transparent helmets—which proceeded to flop and squirm laboriously across the hot sand. Each paused at a convenient distance from the rows of bones and arched itself to obtain a better view. They seemed to be satisfying themselves that all was well with this weird, open-air necropolis and, apparently pleased, lollopped into the vegetation bordering the dunes. Save for the noise of their slithering across the beach, they made no sound.

"Stuttering Sirius!" exclaimed Hartnell, still forgetting that the recorder was on back at the ship. "What in Altair are those?"

He need not have asked. We both knew full well that the unholy, baggy creatures represented two "divers" from Zello's under-water world. In the same way that human beings used air-filled suits to explore the seas, so these

fish-men enclosed themselves in water-filled envelopes for the purpose of visiting land. At least, we imagined the shapeless suits, with their peculiar flipper-like projections, to be thus loaded with liquid, and there was certainly transparent fluid in the helmets, in which heads fashioned similarly to that of the dead creature on the beach could be dimly seen.

Then Hartnell chuckled and I saw in his expression the anticipation of mischief. "Calling Dr. Lambert," he intoned, formally, for the benefit of the record. "Specialised creatures of piscene formation emerged from the sea at 14.56 hours and moved into undergrowth. Let us have your opinion, please. Awaiting reply urgently."

I knew he had never become reconciled to the presence of a girl with an Inter-X expedition, but I thought this was taking prejudice a bit too far—verging on the spiteful, in fact.

As it happened, though, she proved equal to the challenge.

"Dr. Lambert now leaving for your location," crackled the radio, bringing us the girl's voice. "Request you make no further move until arrival, in case valuable specimens may be lost owing to ignorance."

I wanted to say "Now see what you've done!" but the open recorder channel dissuaded me.

Hartnell grimaced by way of apology—as well he might, for we were now due to lie hidden on the dunes until Dr. Lambert arrived. However, he had the last word. He yawned, turned on his side and said: "In that case, I might as well get some sleep."

Within a few moments he was slumbering like a little child. I looked at him and knew a certain wistful envy.

However, somebody had to remain on guard, I supposed, so I switched on a director beam for Dr. Lambert's benefit and settled down to wait.

Nothing moved beneath that hot, alien sky, save slowly-lapping waves of the oily, blue sea. Dark outlines of the dead fish-creature lay athwart the shining white bones. Slowly, a dreadful feeling of apprehension and despair crept over me. Why had we come to this peculiar, topsy-turvy world? Would we meet the same mysterious fate at the hands of Khama as our comrades aboard the *Helga*?

The girl's voice in the headphones made me start violently. "Now approaching your location. Please show visual signal." Her radio-speaking procedure was correct and "according to the book." The controller would give a stern, approving nod when he re-ran the recording.

A rustling among the undergrowth preceded her arrival, and through the helmet's morynium facepiece I saw in her eyes the same light of eagerness so frequently reflected in Hartnell's at any new and exciting situation. Maybe I was growing old and tired; new prospects seemed to irritate rather than entice me with their novelty.

I saw her smile as she looked at Hartnell, still asleep. Then she gave a little chuckle. I wondered what the controller would make of that.

We waited, but nothing happened.

Patricia Lambert's face slowly changed with disappointment, making the eyes dull and puzzled and her mouth sulkily down-turned with impatience.

"Can't you even wait ten minutes without going all temperamental?" I snapped. The suit felt stifling and itchy. A strange uneasiness made me keep wanting to look upwards over my shoulder.

"I—I'm sorry—" Her lips trembled.

"So you should be," said Hartnell. I didn't know how long he'd been awake. The rasp in his voice was unmistakable. I'd never know him in such fury. "This is a man's job—you've no right to crash in on Inter-X!"

That's the way, I thought, approvingly. Shake her out

of it good and proper, or we'll have her on our hands with the screaming meemies.

Tubby's frantic query rattled unheeded in the amplifier. "What's the matter? What's happening?"

The girl started to whimper. I saw her face, drained of blood, a pale oval behind the facepiece. "I'm scared! I—I just can't help it. But why? What's suddenly made me so frightened?"

I felt a little pulse behind my ear begin to throb madly. "Scared? Of course you're scared? We're all scared. Landing on strange planets, wondering what's going to jump out and grab you by the leg isn't a tea-party back on Kepitalon III. Women!" I said, disgustedly. "This'll be a lesson to me, all right!" I felt myself trembling with rage and apprehension. "Specialised knowledge my foot! A marine zoologist's about as much use in our job as a sick headache—"

"Or a broken-down old botanist!" snarled Hartnell.

"You conceited young space-pup!" I'd have given a month's pay to struggle across the sand and beat his brains out, yet some dreadful terror of lifting my head from the sheltering grass pinned me raging and helpless.

"I'm so . . . frightened!" whispered Patricial Lambert, again. "I—I daren't even move! I'm . . . frightened!"

"So am I!" grated Hartnell. "But it won't stop me from choking this useless old—"

"The controller!" shouted Tubby. He must have been tearing his hair by this time. "For pity's sake don't forget the recorder's on! What the devil's happening?"

I tried to laugh scornfully, but the noise sounded more like a death-rattle. "You—the great Hartnell—scared?"

He showed his teeth, white and menacing in a tanned face. We lay glaring at one another.

"I don't understand," wailed Patricia, desperately. "I'm afraid—and I don't know why!"

The repeated phrase twanged memory's chord, yet swirling emotions made my reaction slower than that of Tubby, back at the ship, puzzled but clear-minded.

"That's it!" he bellowed. "Don't you see, you darned fools? That's it! That's what they said aboard the *Helga*!"

I lay limp inside my suit on the sand. Once more I seemed to hear that croaking message of death: "Why do . . . we feel . . . so . . . afraid? Khama? But there's nothing . . . nothing here . . ."

Trembling and helpless, I closed my eyes. There was nothing here on the beach, either, yet dread and raging fury had descended upon us. Something of the same influences must be around us as had swung the peeper to her doom. How had Toombes described it? "Artificially induced hallucinations . . . ray projections emitted from the sea-bed . . ."

"Blazing Betelgeuse!" muttered Hartnell. "What happened?"

Memory said again: "But there's nothing . . . nothing here . . ."

And yet there was something here—two shapeless, flopping horrors wandering in the vicinity. Had they power—consciously or unconsciously—to exert subtle miasmas which inspired terror? And, arising from that terror, unquestioning obedience? For was there not first of all terror aboard the *Helga*, followed by the willing cry of "Khama, we're coming!" and that fatal dive beneath the waves? Was that where Khama lay—deep below the surface of Zello's bright blue sea, where the under-water city loomed?

"For pity's sake!" pleaded Tubby, over the radio. "Are you all right?"

Each of us proved to exhausted to answer. I moved my dry lips, but no sound came. I closed my eyes again.

The fear had gone. Realisation had brought release. Now we knew that our snarling, childish insults—unheard of previously between two who had known such long, unselfish comradeship as Hartnell and myself, and which certainly we would never have dreamed of addressing to a girl—must have arisen from malevolent emanations. Animal fear—tearing away the veneer of civilisation to let primitive instincts bubble forth, so that women cowered away whimpering and men growled insulting defiance. And that horrible murmuring in the background of the *Helga's* radio while the observer choked his bewilderment through the ether—could it have been wild quarrels among a demented crew?"

"Knowledge is power," said the old savants. In our new-found knowledge of what had inspired the terror we became once more creatures of our day and age, because fear is merely a manifestation of the inexplicable.

Finally strength seeped back into our bones and we were able to scramble to our feet, red-faced and sheepish.

"Well," said young Hartnell, drawing a deep breath. "We beat it—whatever it was! And now we've won it looks like a matter of apologies all round. Maybe I'd better start—"

"No, no," I said, hurriedly. "It was my fault. I called you a conceited—"

"I said you were a broken-down old botanist." His eyes were dancing mischievously again. "You're not so old, Pop."

"Thanks for the apology," I said, rather coldly. "Er—Miss Lambert—doctor—"

She smiled with more of her old spirit. "Don't let's bother, shall we?" I thought she shuddered slightly. "We'll be ready for it—next time."

Three gloved hands smacked together as a signal that all offensive remarks were forgiven and forgotten.

"Very touching, I'm sure," said Tubby, from the ship. "All pals together again, eh? Don't forget that if it hadn't been for me you'd still be scratching each other's eyes out like a mob of Jolos-cats on Kosmodar—"

"Confound that open channel!" muttered Hartnell. "The controller won't get much information, maybe, but he's sure of a good laugh."

I was on the point of saying I doubted whether controllers even could laugh when I remembered the recording and kept my mouth shut.

"Well," I said. "What now?"

"Keep waiting for those two 'divers' to come back, I suppose." He frowned, thoughtfully. "Wonder what they're doing?"

We weren't kept long in suspense on this point. I was looking at Patricia Lambert, trying to find out whether her eyes were really grey or a very light blue, when my foot caught in a tuft of wiry grass.

I didn't look down but said, with a light laugh, "You remember me talking just now about things on strange planets that jumped out and grabbed you by the leg—"

Then I did look, and the words died in my throat. It wasn't a tuft of grass. It was one of the fish-men lying there who had seized me with his flipper, and I stared straight through his water-filled helmet at his black, horrible, shapeless head. Six or seven others arched themselves to look at us from where they sprawled in a close circle.

"Outside party calling Scout Ship 46B," said young Hartnell, calmly, into the microphone. "Have established contact with natives of Zello. Further report follows."

If anything remained to be forgiven, I did it then and there.

CHAPTER FOUR

Citadel Under the Ocean

THE thing at my feet made no effort to relax its grip, nor did those lying around move in any way. For what might have been an eternity, both parties remained motionless, studying each other. Principal new fact which printed itself on my memory lay in the point that the fish-men's bubble-shaped helmets were not entirely filled with water. A small air-space remained at the top, presumably for the purpose of aerating fluid in their suits, and I stared as though hypnotised at this gently swaying globule.

In fact all the animation was left to Tubby, who obviously bounced up and down furiously in his chair, shouting: "What d'you mean? Contact? You never ought to have gone without me? Why should I be left out of the fun?" Fun? He ought to have been there! "Give me a quick report now! I'm coming to take pictures!"

"Well, come on, then," said Hartnell. "And bring the diving kit with you. Looks like we'll need it!" He snapped his fingers in sudden inspiration. This gesture struck me as being rather foolhardy considering the circumstances, but the fish-men didn't seem to interpret it as hostile. "If you've got a big, coloured ball handy, bring that, too. I've just thought what this lot remind me of—performing seals!"

Despite the tension of that moment, I groaned. More meat for the Disciplinary Committee. Inter-X never took kindly to levity and by this time the charge-sheet must be a mile long.

"I'll do that," promised Tubby. "Don't go away now." Either he, too, had forgotten the recording or thought we might as well all be demoted together. "Markeson's taking over the radio watch."

Feeling more embarrassed than actually frightened with that light grip still on my leg, I studied the girl's reactions. Plainly, she was fascinated by the sight of those revolting creatures and mentally noted their visible anatomical details with the care of one who loved her vocation.

To a certain extent I could understand such an attitude in anyone with pride in their job. Hartnell often pulls my leg about the time I stopped to pick up a highly peculiar species of spay-leaved cycadales on Zonnash, forgetting that we were busy running away from a couple of wild palidaurs. It was, as he said, "the botanist in me." Pat Lambert no doubt felt the same about her particular work, but personally I could never get used to handling the loathsome lumps of flesh and gristle that zoologists and biologists have to dissect. Whatever you care to say about plants, they are "clean."

So there we stood, surrounded and awaiting the next move. Having been in similar ticklish situations before, we left the opening gambit to the fish-men.

When it came, we felt simultaneously petrified and shaken to the core.

A "voice" said, half-accusingly, "The tall one has been speaking to the ship!"

I heard—and yet, somehow, I did not actually hear—those astounding, watery-sounding syllables. Certainly, the outside radio channel remained quiet, the inter-com was silent and the external amplifier brought nothing save the gentle "shush-shush" of oily surf on the beach. I saw Patricia's mouth an "O" of consternation and young Hartnell's eyes popping with astonishment.

"Hey, Markeson! Did you speak just then?" Hart-

nell, as usual, was first to throw off the paralysis of amazement.

"Scout Ship 46B calling outside party. No communication received here." The routine phrases were intoned according to procedure. Markeson, at least, didn't intend to lay himself open to rebuke by the controller.

The "voice" came once more inside my head: "He has spoken again!"

And then I knew the explanation. Natural telepathy. Perhaps I appreciated it ahead of the others because of experience in handling the Mattus thought-transferer. This delicate apparatus, named after its inventor, might very well be described as an electrical aid to telepathy. It operates on the theory that all intelligent creatures have power to emanate thought-waves which, picked up and amplified by the machine, may be more or less readily understood. The emphasis lies on "more or less" and many times I've reduced myself to a sweat-soaked pulp trying to adjust the thing. Nevertheless, it definitely works, and after a little practice, during which operator and subject establish rapport, communication is possible, though not always easy.

Yet now, with no gadgets, I experienced precisely the same sensations—a "voice" which was not a voice; dim, wavering pictures that sprang unbidden into the mind; curious impressions and emotions that certainly had no internal origin.

There could be no other explanation. And did the fishermen possess this gift inherently, or had they evolved it as an attribute of high civilisation?

Only once before has an Inter-X party encountered natural telepathy—on an incredibly ancient planetoid, where the last intelligent creature was dying in agony when they found him. Rumour has it that three men went insane through suffering the same torments as the

subject. Quite typically, Hartnell said later he was glad that the fish-men apparently enjoyed the best of health.

They enjoyed a positive perception, too. No sooner had these thoughts passed through my mind than another spoke in undertones of surprise and alarm. "This one understands!"

"Which? Which? Which?" The query spattered from all around.

"The one whose ugly fin you hold!"

The flipper dropped my leg as though it had become red-hot. All seven fish-men moved round and arched themselves horribly to inspect me, their bubble-shaped helmets swaying gently to and fro like the heads of some grotesque, menacing serpents.

Information came unbidden to my understanding. "I who stand before you are Tse-Mekko, leader of the land-divers. We have been awaiting you, O Creatures of the Air." The words were formally courteous, yet at the same time cold and empty. I felt an icy hand clutch my heart. Waiting? Did they in some uncanny way expect us to come and see what had happened to our companions in the *Helga*? Were they as intelligent as that? Was it a trap? I felt little prickles as hair on the back of my neck rose with apprehension.

Upon whatever worlds men of Inter-X land, they face inevitably the danger of hostile receptions. As Hartnell said, very reasonably, "Can you blame 'em. How'd you feel in their place?" For this reason, the instruction manual emphasises the necessity of peaceful approach and absence of all movements which might be construed as provocation. At the moment, I couldn't think of better tactics.

I drew a deep breath. "We come in peace," I said. "Peace." Sheer force of concentration started sweat spurt-ing inside the stuffy suit. I put all I had into it. They

shouldn't get the wrong idea if I could help it.

"Peace," said Tse-Mekko. "Peace in the name of Khama the Beautiful, the Ultimate of Beneficence and the Infinity of Fulfilment, who is all things to all men."

Instantly he perceived my recognition. "You have heard of Khama?"

"The name is not unknown to us."

He paused, duly impressed. I took time out to glance at Hartnell and Patricia, seeing immediately from their expressions that they had understood most of our "conversation."

"Hear, then, O Creatures of the Air, the high honour that is yours. We are messengers from Khama herself, sent to summon you for audience." He seemed relieved that some particular obstacle in his mission had been overcome. "Because now I perceive you wear suits, like ourselves—though for what reason I cannot guess, since they contain no water and there would be no point in their so doing—and hence you may descend with us into our native element."

Tse-Mekko appeared highly pleased with this rather involved chunk of reasoning, but before I could start long-winded explanations about the difference between atmosphere suits and diving suits a loud crashing noise mingled with yelps of alarm sounded over the inter-com. It was Tubby.

"Galloping galaxies! Where are you, Pop? Something's grabbed me by the leg! What in the name of Altair—?"

"It's all right," said Hartnell, airily. "Just one of the natives. He played the same trick on Pop a little while ago. Say 'Peace' to him and he'll get up on his hind legs and beg!"

When these two young fools join an expedition they always introduce, either consciously or unconsciously, an

element of burlesque. Somewhere behind the foreshore bushes, Tubby started chirruping "Peace! Peace!" in the manner of someone saying "Good dog! Lie down, then! Good dog!"

Ridiculously enough, these words had the desired effect, and a moment later he burst upon our strange circle followed by one of the awkwardly flopping fish-men.

"Phew!" he said, dropping a great bundle of heavy space suits. "This lot are a weight, even with the gravity-reactor full on."

Patricia nodded towards his escort. "You should have asked him to carry a couple."

I glanced at her sharply. Was this pert Dr. Lambert likely to prove a female Hartnell?

Time for foolery was past, though, because Tse-Mekko started examining the suits curiously, demanding to know many technical details. As a "diver" himself, it must have been professional interest again.

Although wearing our uniforms, all of us felt very much as if we'd been undressing in public when we stripped off the atmosphere suits and climbed into the heavier diving apparatus. The circle of fish-men followed every movement keenly, but they successfully kept secret their thoughts about the proceedings.

Tse-Mekko kept worrying about why we had changed from one suit to another. We were air-breathing creatures, weren't we? Why, then, enclose ourselves away from the air?

"There are different kinds of air," I told him. "Some are pleasant and healthful; others injurious. Occasionally, we need protection from pressure."

"Ah! I understand. You must know that it is the same with us. There is good water and bad water, also increasing pressures of the lower depths—" He fell silent, but not before I perceived a peculiar uneasiness in his

mind when he contemplated the lower reaches of Zello's oceans. I wondered why.

"This is it, then," said Hartnell, briskly. "Better tell 'em back at the ship where we're going."

I had some vague recollection about a direct report to the controller being due soon, but we couldn't wait now.

"Outside party calling Scout Ship 46B," I intoned. "Now proceeding under-water reconnaissance in company with natives."

"Message received and understood," said Markeson. That boy had all the makings of a controller. Nothing seemed able to shake him from proper procedure.

We plodded slowly and painfully across the beach, as clumsy in our heavy coverings as were the fish-men which flopped and wriggled beside our feet. Lead-weighted boots sank deeply into the loose, dry sand despite the help of gravity gadgets and I was thankful when, more than waist-deep, assistance came from the water's buoyancy.

The bright blue sea reached our shoulders, then our necks, finally closing over the facepieces of our helmets to present a view possessing all the strange fascination of a submarine landscape. Seen from below, the water assumed a light, greyish-green tinge, through which we could observe every detail of the sea bed, while overhead sunshine was reflected in silvery steel.

The beach shelved quite gradually at a descent of about one-in-fifty. Soon the greenish hue of the water deepened and we lay with all our weight against a current that pulled strongly shorewards.

The fish-men paused and wriggled out of their suits with obvious relief. Now they were literally in their element, darting lithely around and in front of us in a way that deliberately turned the tables. In appearance they were identical with the creature which had been so unceremoniously hurled from the water to the heap

of skeletons—black, shiny and sinuous, with definitely prehensile flippers. They hooked their “diving” suits round one of these flippers and towed the apparatus effortlessly.

At thirty feet it was much darker, and the pressure began to force the material of our suits against arms and legs with every movement.

I looked at Dr. Lambert. She was staring around with fascination and bewilderment.

“What’s the matter?”

“Haven’t you noticed? No shells, no seaweed—only clean, bare sand.”

“Hm,” I said. “This is a bit out of my line. I suppose it’s not new to you, though.”

“Oh, no, I’ve been down lots of times.”

I regarded her with fresh respect. Personally, I felt tired already at blundering along in slow motion inside the heavy suit, and over the inter-com I could hear Tubby breathing hard. This slenderly built girl must be a lot tougher than she looked.

“Don’t try to fight the current, Pop—do you mind me calling you Pop? Sway with it—let the water carry you, as it were, and do all the work. You’ll save a lot of energy that way, and everything’s all right so long as you don’t lose your footing.”

I tried out the idea and found with pleased surprise that it definitely worked. “You’re right, you know. Thanks, Patricia.”

Hartnell gave a sudden exclamation. “Almighty Altair! When you said that name I thought my air lock’d sprung a leak! We’d better just call you Pat in future and forget the sibilants! It’ll be easier on the nerves!”

Obviously, Dr. Levison P. Lambert was now one of us.

Although our path lay along the unmarked sand that rose in tiny, lazy spurts almost like smoke with every step,

rocks became visible on either side, and a slight movement among them caused a scurry. Alarm spattered through our escort as they swung into position with the precision of trained fighting troops and everything was over before we realised it had begun. With a great clattering and rattling of vicious, bony jaws, they pounced on a grey, rubbery thing with a long tail and tore it to pieces.

"An outlaw," explained Tse-Mekko, swimming easily back to us. "A grave-robber awaiting our re-passing along the Sacred Way from the cemetery—" was that why the sand had been so scrupulously cleared of weeds and shells? "—to prey upon the body of the citizen recently deposited there."

Shreds of tattered grey flesh hung in the water, while across our facepieces floated a mist of dark blood that made me recoil with loathing.

At seventy feet the suits became so pressed in by weight of water that definite chafing began.

"We'd better start the inflation motors," said Pat. "They only need switching on—the pressure's maintained automatically after that. There's an oxygen-helium mixture in the reservoir tanks that makes breathing easier."

I heard the faint whine, felt my ear-drums click once or twice, then knew relief from the heavy fabric.

Now we began to see on either side great swaying masses of seaweed—vegetation after the fashion of kelp, bladderwrack and carrageen, although, frankly, I couldn't understand it growing at such a depth.

Tse-Mekko sensed my puzzlement. "Here are cultivated gardens outside the city, where our people may refresh themselves among the cool weeds. All things for their pleasure and comfort are provided." I could imagine him absurdly stretching round with a fin in the greenish-gloom. "Once this place was only a disorderly jungle—

a vast, untidy expanse of uncultivated plants and littered with sponges, sea-worms, corals, anemones and molluscs. Our planners are proud to have converted it into a park of such astounding beauty."

I peered into the darkness, not particularly impressed.

"But you shall witness greater wonders soon, when we enter Nuklar, metropolis of Zello—the mightiest city known to the universe, city of the All-Wise, All-Seeing Khama!"

Soon there loomed before us vast, squat ramparts whose tops were lost in the murk. Their size and outline were breath-taking, although no particular ornamentation decorated the massive walls which flanked an entrance thoroughfare to the city. Here, for the first time, we saw other inhabitants of the under-water community—not all of them of similar species to the fish-men who escorted us—but they seemed to take no notice of our little party struggling along through the ooze and swam swiftly about their business. Perhaps they were on their way to enjoy the delights of cultivated seaweed "gardens" during leisure hours.

Anchored as we were to the ocean floor, most of the movement that soon began to take place occurred high above our heads.

"Look at 'em up there," said Hartnell. "Swarms of 'em—swimming in lines like helicopters on the way to a football match."

"The *Helga* talked of 'traffic,' didn't she?" I asked, soberly. "That's what they saw from up above."

Patricia paused interestedly near a rounded, towering buttress to examine the stone. A little exclamation of satisfaction sounded on the inter-com. "I thought so! Coral!"

"Coral?" Until now I'd somehow taken it for granted that the city was built from some kind of ordinary stone.

Yet how could the fish-men have fashioned such refractory material? Could they manufacture stone-working tools without fire? How, indeed, would any sort of metal be manufactured under water? Obviously, a great many questions remained unanswered.

Tse-Mekko "overheard" the question and seemed highly pleased by the fact that we were impressed. "Yes, Nuklar is built of coral. In our greater knowledge, we have pressed into service the microscopic members of our community. Left to themselves, of course, they would build haphazardly, forming colonies where they choose, and, in dying by countless millions, leave jagged accretions of their limestone shells in an untidy and purposeless formation. By orderly control, however, they work for the greater glory of Khama."

Patricia stroked her gloved hand across the smooth, polished stone admiringly. Despite being here, in the depths of an alien community, there were matters which she understood and appreciated far more than we did. I'd heard of coral insects forming atolls in the sea which gradually accumulated soil and became tropical islands, but to use them for constructing a city—

Now we approached the centre of Nuklar, seeing how the buildings became more ornate and the thoroughfares wider. Some great, dark edifices, indeed, boasted decorations of living seaweeds after the style that flowering plants are used in our own world.

My meter registered nearly five hundred feet. Increasing gloom and murk became oppressive. The lower seas must have been bitterly cold, yet Tse-Mekko and his friends took no notice. Fortunately for us, any suit capable of insulating its wearer from the cold of outer space could easily cope with temperatures of water.

I thought again about the *Helga*. Falling within precincts of the city as she had, the fish-men could not fail to

have observed the disaster. I asked Tse-Mekko about it.

"Ah, yes," he said, regretfully, and with no small embarrassment. "We had looked forward to welcoming your companions to Nuklar. We of Zello know nothing concerning flight in the air. Look-outs on our topmost towers observed your ship's approach and the great Choirs of Greeting were assembled to chant a mighty chorus in the name of Khama—"

There was a mental picture of thousands of fish-men perched along ramparts nearest the surface, directing in unison the full power of their thought-messages towards the little scout vessel as she circled. I caught my breath in horror. "Emanations from the sea-bed," Toombes had said. He didn't know the half of it. Small wonder that wild, unreasoning terror had reigned aboard or that the call of Khama had been so blindly and fatally obeyed.

"Where is the ship?" I asked. "We would like to take away our comrades' bodies and dispose of them according to our custom."

Tse-Mekko provided a regretful, helpless negative. "Unfortunately that is impossible. We sympathise with your wishes, of course, but we cannot help."

"Why should that be?"

"The ship is beyond our reach. On the far side of Nuklar, past outermost bastions where every year the great religious ceremonies are held, a huge cleft divides the ocean floor. Into this chasm your comrades plunged. They lie in water which is, by your measurement, more than twenty miles deep."

Twenty miles? Despite sweaty heat inside the suit I broke out with goose-pimples. What did Man really understand of the seas on any planet? Even today, with all the resources of modern science, no one had descended more than one miserable mile. Grabs and dredges, working blindly in slime below the great seas on Zonnash—

where a depth of nine miles had so far proved a record for any known world—were hardly worth their operating costs. In normal water the first six hundred feet teemed with animal and vegetable life; light faded at slightly more than half a mile; between two and three miles down strange, luminous creatures swam around preying on each other under pressures capable of crushing beryllium tubing. Below that was—what?

Imagination took me down farther into the icy darkness—a domain of monsters existing under titanic weight of water which would grind out of existence all things that sank from higher reaches. A terrifying, unknown world of sinister blackness, contemplation of which made me shudder anew.

"Glad you didn't turn out the Choirs of Greeting for us," said Hartnell, dryly. "Otherwise we might be down there with 'em. The result's rather overpowering, you know."

Tse-Mekko said they were unaware we had even landed, and only their melancholy duty of "burying" the deceased citizen and venturing on land for the purpose of minor chores enabled them to meet us accidentally. First knowledge that we had travelled by means of a similar ship reached them telepathically by "overhearing" our radio reports.

We strove slowly forward through increasing gloom.

"Everybody all right?" asked Hartnell. "My motor's still piling on the pressure."

Considering that for every ten feet we descended an additional four pounds to the square inch had to be endured, this wasn't surprising, yet although we experienced discomfort there was no actual pain or dizziness. Much of this must have been due to the tough substance of our suits.

"I'd feel better," said Tubby, in a rather depressed man-

ner, "if somebody'd tell me how I'm supposed to take photographs in the dark. I've got infra-red and ultra-violet beams going, but I don't think they'll be much good—"

Indeed, had it been possible to enjoy a panoramic view of Nuklar by daylight the spectacle would have proved wholly astounding. As we discovered later, the city—with its countless broad avenues, main traffic roads, subsidiary ways, vast open squares and cultivated "parks"—stretched for miles parallel to the shore, while its massive, round-roofed buildings extended to within comparatively few feet of the surface. Yet these many-storeyed edifices possessed more squat, brutal outlines than our own more slender structures. Tse-Mekko explained this as being due to need for withstanding tides and currents, coupled with the lightness of coral-limestone in relation to its bulk. So they understood something of constructional engineering. What else did they understand?

The overhead ways now swarmed with "traffic." From where we stood, anchored to the ocean ooze, we could dimly see them moving in occasional subdued flashes of light penetrating through upper waters. Now and again squads of peculiar things clustered against the foot of a building repairing or decorating, while scavenging creatures worked on a level with our ankles clearing up debris.

None took any apparent notice, yet Tse-Mekko apologised for their presence. "It is unfortunate that we must enter the city by so humble a route—yet being obliged to move upon the ground there is no other way for you." A sudden realisation of oversight made him positively groan with distress. "And that being the case, how is it possible for you to enter the sacred Audience Chamber of Khama, since it is situated in the Temple of Zello more than three hundred feet above our heads?"

Communicative alarm from minds of troubled fish-men prickled among us.

"What's the matter?" called Tubby, urgently. "Did I miss something just now?"

Hartnell chuckled. "Looks as though Khama'll have to come to see us instead!"

But Tse-Mekko and his men found it no laughing matter. "We have failed in our mission. Khama will be justly wrathful. Moreover, it is the Day of Righteous Oppression and we shall undoubtedly be sacrificed—"

I felt my blood run cold. What unspeakable rites had we stumbled upon? And who were the victims of this "oppression?" "Sacrificed? How? Why?" I had a fleeting vision of fish-men being flung over a precipice, but this was manifestly absurd.

"Perhaps," said Hartnell, "it would be possible for your squad to lift us—"

Thus it was that we entered the citadel of Zello—gravity-reactors full on, trying to get a helpful grip with hands and feet upon outside walls of the most massive building we had so far encountered, while half a dozen fish-men hauled by the slack of our suits.

Slowly we climbed up and up, losing sight of the ocean floor—for which I was thoroughly thankful, having no head for heights—seeing only close to our faces the smooth, light-brown coral. From time to time we passed apertures in the walls, where messengers sped to and fro, and once in the distance sounded some dull, rumbling explosion that set the gigantic walls vibrating.

"It is nothing," said Tse-Mekko, hurriedly. "Nothing which need cause alarm—a natural phenomenon." Yet I detected in his mind that inexplicable uneasiness I had noted before.

We climbed on and on, finding the process so strenuous and slow that I started to sweat copiously despite all assistance.

"Another hundred feet," said Tse-Mekko. "Another

hundred feet—that is all. The audience chamber lies, by your measurement, about two hundred feet below the surface.”

“Well,” panted Hartnell, “at least it’ll be a bit more pleasant up there than down below—”

“You hope!” said Tubby, shortly. I gathered he wasn’t enjoying the proceedings any more than Hartnell. Patricia wisely said nothing, but saved her breath for climbing.

With lessening pressure from water in lower depths, our suits gradually began to swell out—not with elasticity like balloons, but sufficiently to ease the chafing which troubled us. At two hundred feet my safety valve blew automatically, blasting surplus air through the water in a great, smoky cloud of white bubbles.

The result was, to say the least, startling. All the fishermen seemed to shriek with panic and darted away crying “Komola! Komola!”

Hartnell, Tubby and Patricia succeeded in clinging precariously to the face of the citadel. Probably because I was taken by surprise, too, I released my grip. The current tugged me away from the wall. My scrabbling fingers failed to grip and, unsupported, I began to sink, arms and legs waving in absurd slow-motion, turning helplessly over and over into the depths of Zello’s murky ocean.

Yet as I passed one of the entrance apertures—a dead-black shadow on the gloom-shrouded coral—there emerged a long, sinewy tentacle which wrapped itself round my waist and drew me swiftly inside.

CHAPTER FIVE

Emissary From the Underworld

WATER-DRAG against the suit, as well as sheer terror, prevented me from struggling with any conspicuous success. All I could do was cling with both hands to the loathsome, sinewy thing that clasped so powerfully and try to wrench it away, meanwhile being swung like a stick on the end of a piece of rope. Sick with fear, I felt myself dragged quickly round the side of a wall and held close to whatever it was that had seized me. Frankly, I was too frightened even to scream for help over the intercom.

And then the situation dramatically changed. A telepathic voice said urgently: "Do not resist! I come as a friend—as a friend, I tell you! Listen—"

I couldn't do anything else. I "listened," hearing mainly the pounding of an overburdened heart and breath whistling through a throat parched and constricted with horror.

"My name is Jolos—one of the Middle People and a messenger from the Gentle Ones of the Underworld. I bring warning for you and your companions! Beware of Tse-Mekko! Beware of Khama—" The voice broke off, then resumed. "We have no time now—they seek you. I will find you again—"

My release was marked by that same lack of ceremony which had accompanied the sudden kidnapping. The whip-like tentacle towed me violently towards the aperture and once more I was floating head downwards towards the sea-bed. I had a horrid notion my helmet might bury itself in the mud, leaving only legs waving desperately, but

before I reached lowest levels, two fish-men competently hooked their flippers beneath my arm-pits, pulled me right side up and commenced once more to climb.

If at that moment they tried to sort out my impressions they must have been as baffled as I was, for my mind remained full of fright and bewilderment. Who were the Middle People? Who were the Gentle Ones? Where was the "underworld"?

We entered the citadel by another and more ornate aperture, while matters were made more comfortable at this height by better visibility in the greenish light that pervaded our surroundings.

Tse-Mekko led us along a baffling maze of tall corridors illuminated by elongated patches of phosphorescence to a cubby-hole where long racks of seaweed had been arranged.

"This is for your comfort until the Hour of Audience," he said. "Nothing else seems within our power, yet we would afford whatever hospitality is possible to honoured guests. No doubt you carry in your suits whatever food sustains you?"

With that he bowed mentally and departed, followed by his henchmen, who still trailed "diving" gear from their flippers.

Hartnell tried the seaweed bed, bouncing himself up and down playfully. "Not bad at all, Pop. How about us getting the weight off our feet for a while. I gather we're due for a prolonged ceremonial soon." He lay back and rested in those fantastic surroundings as calmly as though he'd been in his bunk aboard *Old Growler*.

"Good idea," said Tubby. "Think I'll join you."

Patricia laughed delightedly. It was easy to see she hadn't been very long in the company of these two cool young devils. "How do they do it, Pop?" Yet next minute she had dismissed the matter and was staring round the coral cubicle. "Isn't this the most wonderful thing—?"

"They won't rest their lazy carcasses much when they hear what happened to me just now," I said, grimly. Then I recounted the episode of Jolos and his mysterious warning.

"How could he?" demanded Hartnell, sitting up. "You were hardly out of sight for a couple of seconds." I'd been right about disturbing his rest. I saw his forehead knotted with puzzlement. "So Jolos—whoever he may be—told us to beware, did he?" He mulled matters over. "Think he meant it—or did he just want to make our flesh creep?"

Tubby said his had been creeping ever since we came down, never mind mysterious warnings.

I sighed. "How do I know? I never even saw him. And who in Andromeda are the Gentle Ones?"

There was a brief silence while each of us thought about matters in his or her individual way.

"It looks to me," said Tubby, at last, "like political manœuvrings."

And, indeed, it did. On other occasions we had encountered intrigue and trickery and double-cross aimed at enlisting our help for particular sides, yet if there was one thing which Inter-X resolutely forbade its representatives to meddle in, on pain of highest penalties, it was affairs concerning other worlds' governments. The sudden appearance of Jolos indicated that all might not be sweetness and light in the well-ordered metropolis of Nuklar, with its clean-swept "streets" and well-regulated "traffic."

"I don't see any reason to distrust Tse-Mekko," said Hartnell, at last. "He wasn't obliged to bring us here if he didn't want to co-operate. He seemed quite subdued about the *Helga*, too. Looks like one of those things you've always got to be ready for with Inter-X—a bad accident brought about through ignorance. Tse-Mekko and his crowd weren't to know the chorus of welcome could

lead to disaster." He lay back again on the bed. "Must have been pretty overpowering for the poor devils on board, having concentrated telepathy from all that crowd focused on 'em."

"I dunno," confessed Tubby, helplessly. "It's not my line of country, but I can't get used to the idea of intelligent fish."

There was, however, one among us who had all details at her fingertips. If the cumbersome suit had allowed, I'd have bowed to her. "Your turn, Pat. How's it come about?"

In the dim light I saw her face become grave with concentration. "I don't want to seem too much like a school-maam, but logically the idea isn't at all unreasonable—"

And while from time to time I thought how utterly ridiculous it was for us to be sitting meekly in a room of artificial coral two hundred feet under the sea discussing marine biology, she explained her reasons. Anyhow, while awaiting our summons into Khama's presence there wasn't anything else to do.

"You see," said Dr. Levison Patricia Lambert, "all organic life originates in water. Somehow—no one knows exactly—one-celled organisms suddenly appear in the ooze. Then, through millions of years, they gradually develop, becoming the tiny, creeping things and minute plants that make the sea of any inhabited world an even greater menagerie of life-forms than the land areas. They turn into starfish and molluscs and all kinds of water-spawned creatures until eventually some of them seek to live on dry earth. Still, I suppose you knew this already—"

"We're following you, teacher," said Hartnell, lazily. "The whole point is: what made 'em go to all the trouble of transferring themselves to land? Weren't they comfortable in the water?"

She laughed—not in any embarrassed way, but with

genuine amusement. "It must have been the same sort of urge that made you join Inter-X—wanting to see what was on the other side of the fence!" Then she proceeded with the exposition. "But if brain-power and intelligence grow with evolution—as they undoubtedly do—why shouldn't fishes, having all those millions of years start, be well in advance of land animals?"

"They ought to be," I said, cautiously, "but Zello's the first instance I've ever heard of."

"Pop's a hidebound old botanist," said Hartnell, with a grin. "Never able to get used to new ideas. I don't think he's ever recovered from the shock of finding intelligent plants on Orbis—"

"That was different," I told them, with some show of dignity, but they only chuckled.

Hartnell yawned. "Well, I'm going to catch up some sleep. I feel tired. Maybe it's living under pressure—" He looked round at us in our diving suits, expecting applause for this feeble witticism. He got none. "Anyway, thanks for the lesson, teacher."

Dr. Lambert wrinkled her nose at him in a most unprofessional way.

We all reclined on the seaweed couches, but in my case, at least, repose proved elusive. I found myself thinking about the *Helga*, Khama and Tse-Mekko. The clear green water of the room remained motionless.

Absolute quiet reigned, save for faint sounds of breathing audible over the inter-com, although outside the streams of traffic must have been moving swiftly and silently at their proper levels. What was their business, I wondered. Why did they travel so busily to and fro? Could it be possible that they were allotted certain duties in the scheme of Zello's civilisation?

Very many questions remained unanswered. These metal racks holding the seaweed mattresses, for instance. How

was the ore smelted and the material wrought? Yes, we would have a vast fund of information to pass on to the controller. I hoped he would be pleased—

Then I jerked bolt upright in consternation. I'd forgotten to make the routine report! Oh, well, another black mark couldn't very much alter the lack of esteem in which we were already held by those in authority. I wondered whether I might be getting too old for the job. An Inter-X man, of all people—forgetting things, feeling all the time sweat on his palms and a cold weight of dread in his stomach.

Once more I pulled myself together. Surely, this queer depression was what I'd known earlier—before Tse-Mekko and his squad revealed themselves. It was the uncanny preliminary to telepathy which, catching humans off their guard, inspired that awful, inexplicable fear.

And then I knew! Something lay near to us—lurking among the coral labyrinth and the green water. Something that was trying stealthily to read our minds? A spy?

But where? I dared make no move in case hidden eyes observed, nor dare I speak on the inter-com lest the intention become broadcast by involuntary thought-emana-tions. Did some intruder lie, perhaps, like a burglar beneath the bed?

"That is true!" said a sudden "voice." It is I, Jolos! I rest under the couch on which you recline."

Should I call the others? I'd always had a suspicion that Hartnell, in particular, didn't take my story of Jolos seriously.

"Don't shout!" exclaimed Jolos, urgently. "Tse-Mekko's guards are near!"

Shout? What in Sirius did he mean by that?

"Try to screen your thoughts. None save ourselves must know what transpires—or all is lost!"

Hartnell was right—he did want to make our flesh creep.

But I understood what Jolos meant by thought-screening. The human mind—or any fully intelligent mind, come to that—is a wonderful and delicate mechanism. Take memories, for instance—all the things we have learned or experienced. They are stored in the brain by neurons, ready to be released on call. (Except, naturally, those which are accidentally forgotten, such as omitting to call the controller at a specified time.) But in addition we have active and current thoughts—thoughts about events in the course of transpiring. If, for instance, we concentrate upon mending a watch, thought-emanations concern that matter alone. All the history, botany and poetry we have learned, all the journeys we have made, all our friends whose names and faces are so familiar, all the music we have remembered—they are screened in their entirety by thoughts of watch-mending. To a certain extent, current thoughts can also be screened—as though speaking in a whisper to one person, so that none may “overhear.”

I suppose practice with the Mattus came in handy again, and when I next addressed myself to Jolos he apparently approved. I raised the subject uppermost in our minds. “Why did you warn us against Tse-Mekko and Khama?”

“Beware of them both, O Strangers of the Outer Spaces. Especially of Khama, for she possesses great and supernatural powers. Khama seeks only self-glory. Once she has wrung from you the knowledge she desires, you and your companions will be killed—”

This was too much! “Surely there is a mistake. Tse-Mekko has welcomed us to Nuklar—”

Surprisingly, he greeted my flat disbelief not with resentment, but with mingled pity and resignation. “This I tell you truly—there is great sorrow on Zello since Khama reigns. Tyranny, executions and oppression—all manners of evil are accomplished in her name.”

Oppression? That rang a bell.

"You are thinking of what they call the Day of Righteous Oppression. Yes, that is today. Truly, there will be much mourning and suffering—not here in Nuklar but among the Gentle People in the Lower World. How many will be chosen by Fate to die cannot be guessed—"

Listening with mounting horror, I cried: "But why? Why?"

"To provide both sport and misguided revenge—the acme of refined cruelty—"

"Who," I asked, "are the Gentle People?"

"The city's final bastions rise on the edge of a vast abyss torn from Zello's ocean floor in ages past." We knew about this already, but I didn't like to interrupt. "The depth is so great that races of Nuklar would be killed by pressure ere they ventured a fraction of the distance. In lower reaches of this chasm live the Gentle People, whom none has ever seen. They, in turn, cannot rise towards the Upper World. Being fashioned to resist titanic weights of water—in a world of darkness where each carries his own light—they would quickly burst asunder. Yet we of the Middle World may travel a little way in each direction, holding converse with both sides and being used by Tse-Mekko's community for menial work in depths where they themselves find pressure unpleasant. We clear the lower waters of debris, we hew and transport materials from the huge seaweed forests beyond the city—"

So it was among the Gentle People that the *Helga's* crew found their last resting place—on the floor of an almost bottomless gulf. But what was this about oppression and tyranny?

"From time to time," said Jolos, "ferments create injurious gases beneath ocean ooze—rising, as is the nature of vapours, in bubbles from the underworld to the surface. Yet materialising under such vast pressures, each small bubble swells hugely towards the end of its journey into the atmosphere, tearing through the last of the waters with great roaring and fizzing, distributing its poisons over wide areas and causing many casualties. The occur-

rence is known as 'Komola.' The person whom you saw buried on the beach was one such victim—"

So far as it's possible to do such a thing by telepathy, I raised my eyebrows. "How should you know that?"

The reply came with a certain resigned sadness. "A friend watched on our behalf—to see what plans Tse-Mekko had for you. He was discovered—"

This must have been the grey, rubbery creature, hiding in the rocks, which had received such short shrift from the fish-men. Yet I was puzzled. "Surely, Tse-Mekko merely surfaced to ensure that his dead comrade was properly placed in the necropolis—?"

There might well have been cynicism in the answer, yet I detected none. "The Grand Chancellor of Khama does not concern himself with burial parties. He came to capture you—"

Matters were moving too fast. I took him back a few steps in the conversation to where he had spoken of the rumbling gases bubbling up from the bowels of Zello. This explained the fish-men's panic when the safety-valve of my suit blew; it accounted, also, for the strange, distant explosion we had heard on our way down.

"But how can the Gentle People be killed by those living above, seeing that their natural protection of water is so great—?"

Instead of explanations, I received a sudden impression of alarm. "Tse-Mekko! He approaches! I beseech you to guard your thoughts! If I am discovered it means instant and horrible death!"

I didn't understand in the least what it was all about—only that Jolos seemed sincere in his unpleasant statements.

Tse-Mekko swam through the doorway, leaving a large—and somehow sinister—squad of fish-men waiting outside.

"You have rested well, O Strangers? Zello's ultimate honour now awaits you—an audience with Khama, Queen of the Superlative and Beneficence in Infinity!"

The high-sounding titles which inevitably accompanied

her name were voiced quite sincerely. What kind of a creature should we see? How would one to whom fish-men paid such undoubted homage strike us whose minds and bodies were cast in so vastly different a fashion? Curiously, after the sinister warnings I had received I found my knees buckling and a throbbing, hollow feeling in my midriff.

I called the others.

"Oh," said young Hartnell, in surprise. "Time to go? Ah, well, I feel better for forty winks."

"An escort has been arranged," announced Tse-Mekko. "You will be assisted with every comfort to the throne-room."

Certainly, they did their best. With fish-men on either side to hook supporting flippers under our arm-pits, we were towed along in a procession meant to be dignified, but which merely succeeded—to our eyes, at least—in appearing ludicrous. In what other way we might have got there, however, none can tell, for the building was riddled with floorless towers and corridors where it was impossible to walk. Water in places must have been several hundred feet deep, and I thought how easy it would be, if they wished to prevent us leaving, for them to release us over one of these immense vats and wait while we floated to the bottom.

The throne room, illuminated with blue and green radiance, presented a spectacle of gigantic fantasy. A huge amphitheatre—the roof a hundred feet above our heads and the floor fully as far beneath our feet—was lined with tier upon tier of wide, sloping coral shelves which gave way left and right to side balconies. From above streamed great banners of kelp, while sea-flowers festooned the walls in carefully-regulated patterns, alternating with strange plaques of carved quartz. Cunningly-placed screens of coral divided the auditorium into sections without obscuring the view of a peculiar dais at the far end before which many queer acolytes—clutching wands of office in claws, tentacles and fins—swam in incomprehensible manœuvres.

Most terrifying aspect of all lay in the fact that this vast temple was packed with fish-men in their hundreds of thousands—resting side by side upon the coral shelves that curved upwards as far as the eye could see—all heads pointing towards the dais and their mouths lazily opening and closing.

"The Temple of Zello," murmured Tse-Mekko, reverently. "It is here that I must leave you to perform my sacred duties, having first seen you escorted to a place of honour for the ceremonies which follow."

We were propped upon four of a series of decorated coral pillars rising from the cavern floor and there left under the disturbing mass gaze of assembled multitudes.

The acolytes gyrated endlessly and with a weird beauty. Not only did their company contain fish-men, but creatures of indescribable outline and variety joined in these ritual evolutions.

Gradually I felt myself slipping into dizziness while gazing at that endlessly circling procession.

"Look out, everyone!" called Pat, urgently. "Keep awake, whatever you do—"

Tubby and I jerked ourselves upright.

"I've known this happen before," she went on. "It's a recognised hypnotic effect in zoological laboratories—assistants go to sleep through looking into fish-tanks for a long time—"

"What'll we do?" asked Tubby. "Sing?"

"Heaven forbid!" said young Hartnell, piously.

Then a great and terrifying chanting was borne upon my consciousness. The others heard it, too, and even Hartnell was worried. "Everybody'd better get a grip on themselves! Maybe the effect won't be nice when they all get worked up!"

And in that moment I realised the uncanny "hush" which persisted among all those thousands of motionless fish-men. Would they join in the horrible hymn of praise now being droned by gesticulating acolytes? If the presence of only one could induce that awful, preliminary terror, might not our brains be smashed into madness by

such concentrated masses of thought-impulses? At the moment they must be poised in their places with silent awe.

Yet in spite of everything we could not shut from our minds that insidious chanting. There was no radio apparatus capable of being shut off; no soundproof shelter into which we might retreat. The deathly rhythm was inside our heads—throbbing, beating, droning. I tried to look at Pat's face. It was set and wooden; her eyes were dead and glazed, so far as I could see through the pale green water and through the face-piece of her helmet.

I summoned up every ludicrous thought from long-forgotten crannies of recollection—old Grubersohn, our pompous and dignified chief astronomer, singing an absurd comic song; celebration night in a riotous Z-bar; I started repeating nursery rhymes—anything to break the spell of that dreadful, intellect-weakening dirge sung by misshapen horrors constantly circling the dais.

A dim film of blood seemed to draw itself across my gaze; the very bones of my skull seemed ready to fall asunder; there was a frightful roaring, clanking sound in my ears.

"Shut up!" I shrieked, at the top of my voice. "I can't stand it! Shut up, darn you!"

I was slipping into a black, bottomless pit, my fingers sliding from smooth edges coated with nameless slime. Sick with dizziness, straining to suck air into lungs which refused to act, I let myself go.

This, then, was the end—falling physically from a coral pillar into the deeps of a vast, under-sea cavern; falling mentally into even darker waters of madness and death.

CHAPTER SIX

Khama Makes Her Entrance

THE immortal Einstein, many of whose theories even to this day have not been disproved, declared that "Time is relative." It doesn't need mathematicians with involved, mystical formulæ to demonstrate the fact—anybody can testify from personal experience how speedily time passes when absorbed in some congenial task; how slowly it crawls when duty brings tedious and distasteful work. So, too, with the pleasant unconsciousness of sleep. Who can tell, immediately upon waking in the dark, whether he has slept one hour or four?

And so, when black, swirling waves of numbness swept over me in Khama's great coral temple, I knew nothing of Time. I might have remained in the limbo for one second—or for an eternity. Then—echoing as though through some inky tunnel, summoning me irresistibly back to full awareness, growing louder and louder until at length it seemed that I opened my eyes to the blinding light of high noon—came a voice.

"Controller here! Controller here!"

Hartnell, Tubby and Pat were in the same unhappy condition as myself. Swaying on our coral seats of honour, we surfaced like dogs emerging from a pond, shaking off the last drops of unconsciousness in a spray. Ingrained discipline—the rigid discipline of Inter-X to which we had so long been conditioned—summoned hidden reserves of mental strength we could not have drawn upon unaided.

"Controller here! Calling outside party on Zello. Why do you not answer?"

Dazed and blinking, I tried to croak acknowledgment.

"Controller here! We are not receiving you. Controller here!" I heard him address a further question to the

ship, where Markeson monitored transmissions beside the radio repeater unit, but he got no help from there.

I managed to speak at last, looking anxiously round at the others. "Party . . . on Zello . . . calling controller . . ."

Hartnell puffed out his cheeks with relief. Pat Lambert's face, paler than ever, summoned a wan smile.

"Phew!" said Tubby, breathlessly. "I wouldn't go through that again for a thousand pounds! I don't think I care for fish as much as I did—not even fried in batter!"

"Controller here. We do not understand your transmission. Say again."

Personally I wasn't at all surprised he couldn't make head or tail of our incoherent mumblings. I pulled myself together.

"Zello party speaking. Request postponement of report. Message will follow on emergency frequency."

The controller must have realised matters were sticky. To his eternal credit he didn't ask questions. "Granted."

I'd have given a month's salary to be able to lay back. As it was, each of us still perched there, as Hartnell said afterwards, like a peanut on a monument.

Yet the main, heart-warming fact was that we had won. In the same way that the preliminary terror induced by telepathic radiations had been conquered by human brains, so now we felt confident—for a little longer, at least, of surviving that horrible chanting.

Considering what followed, it was well that such assurance rode high in our minds. Something commenced to rise ponderously from the water beyond the dais. A vast, sighing murmur of expectation came from the waiting multitudes, while the acolytes darted all ways at once in growing frenzy, brandishing their wands of office by way of greeting.

Then we saw it—and Kham! The thing which heaved itself so slowly from some sacred pit proved to be a huge, transparent casket of pale green crystal, elaborately chased and decorated with representations of marine creatures and plants. And inside—inside, mark you—perched upon a massive throne of jade or chrysoprase, surrounded by a

bewildering array of precious ornaments that glistened and twinkled in the subdued light was Khama!

Before the moment when our bulging, incredulous eyes stared at the vision which revealed itself, I'm sure none of us had any clear idea of what we expected to see. Frankly, with one thing and another we had had time only for the sketchiest speculation, probably taking it for granted that this Goddess of Beneficence or any other fulsome descriptions applied to her by Tse-Mekko was merely a larger and grander variety of his own species.

Yet there she was—clearly visible to the overawed assembly and to our astounded selves. Whatever we might have imagined Khama to be, our guesses would most certainly have been wide of the mark. For she was—a plant!

The mere word "plant" is a poor, bald description. That's what it boils down to, of course, brutally speaking, but she was far more than that. Beautifully shaped leaves draped themselves in profusion over the throne of chalcedony, matching its delicate greens in a way that made me gasp with admiration, while tendrils spread in outlines which would have astounded the most demanding artist by their classical perfection. In the centre rested a complex, multi-petalled, gold-and-emerald flower of indescribable beauty. If I'd never worshipped anything in my life before, I was ready in that moment to adore Khama. Botany's my business, and I've seen marvellous examples of vegetation on many worlds—yet never in my wildest dreams had I imagined anything so utterly wonderful. It was the climax of everything—the fulfilment of all desire, the knowledge that here was the end of a life's quest because no future effort could surpass the incredible beauty upon which I now gazed.

With the small portion of my attention that could be spared to notice the others' reactions, I saw how their emotions were precisely the same. Pat kept giving little gasps and sighs of sheer ecstasy at the marvel that confronted her gaze, while Hartnell and Tubby stared goggle-eyed, muttering in disbelief.

The great sigh which ascended from those serried multitudes resting on the coral shelves swept us with it to heights of heavenly delight. Then the sensation of worship faded slowly to a tense, silent expectancy.

Tse-Mekko materialised at the head of assembled acolytes. He might very well have been there all the time, but my mind was too occupied with the living marvel inside that crystal casket to have noticed him. He marshalled the priests into an adoring semi-circle around the dais, sufficiently low not to obstruct lines of sight from the tiers of temple spectators.

A subdued roar of anticipation rang through the cavern. "Khama—she speaks!"

Pat's voice was so low and thrilling as to be scarcely audible. "Did you ever see anything so—so utterly marvellous?" Her eyes shone with wonder.

"No" I said, half-reverently. I shook my head for emphasis. "And you actually realise it, too?"

"Of course! Who wouldn't?"

"Now," said young Hartnell, gaze riveted upon that fantastic throne, "I've seen everything!"

"I'd better not be dreaming!" whispered Tubby. "If these pictures don't turn out all right the controller'll never believe us!"

"He couldn't help it," protested Pat, in sudden alarm. "Why—why, he's just got to believe us!"

Then these quick, muttered exchanges were cut off by a rushing flood of expectancy among the assembly which communicated itself to us in a strange breathlessness.

And Khama "spoke." The voice and the words were there—quite real—inside our heads. "Welcome," said Khama, in tones so low and smooth that they held all the gentle music of the universe. "Welcome to Nuklar." The delicate tendrils waved in lazy graciousness, almost as though water within the shining casket stirred deliciously. "Have not your eyes seen great wonders this day?"

They had indeed. Our acknowledgment of the fact was greeted with warm satisfaction.

"Even greater marvels await your beholding, O Strangers

From the Outer Air. Nothing on Zello shall be hidden from you, for in full communion between nations, races and species lies the means whereby culture may be exchanged and peace promoted throughout the universe. Is this not good?"

All four of us nodded simultaneously. "Yes—it is good."

"Our secrets shall be your secrets. Your secrets shall be our secrets. And so far as barriers of air and water allow our nations shall be friends. This is the spirit in which I—Khama—greet you. Thrice welcome again, then, O Strangers. Now is the time of our greatest religious feast—the Day of Righteous Oppression, in which evil creatures are ceremonially cast from our midst. After you have celebrated it with us, a grand conference shall be summoned that we may both learn more of one another's worlds. Until the foreordained hour, then—farewell!"

We sat upright on our pillars, staring in unashamed wonderment while the crystal casket lowered itself mysteriously behind the dais and as the last phosphorescent gleam died in the dark waters it seemed somehow that a light had also been extinguished in our hearts.

"Well," said young Hartnell, slowly, as the spell lifted. "What d'you know about that?"

Tse-Mekko and his squad reappeared to assist us to the floor of the cavern. He seemed pleased but not surprised at our enthusiasm for Khama and said we must hurry to the scene of celebration.

The journey proved so long that we must have been late for the ceremony had not the fish-men towed us again. Through bewildering tunnels—descending lower and lower so that motors whined and strained to maintain air pressure against the deepening water—we eventually reached a main thoroughfare to see swarms of inhabitants moving swiftly between the buildings in traffic lanes above our heads, all apparently making for the same destination.

Towards the end of our journey, Nuklar's buildings grew more massive and less ornate. Their tops were shrouded in gloom, leaving visible only heavy foundations

which alternately loomed and disappeared as we passed. Eventually we emerged through an embrasure in the last rampart to see almost the city's entire population poised in rank after rank near the face of that vast wall, motionless save for occasional movements of their flippers to maintain rigid formation.

Some distance ahead was ranged a series of giant boulders—each weighing many tons—stretching right and left as far as we could see at intervals of about ten yards. Immediately beyond, the water took on a black, forbidding hue, and despite the surrounding gloom it was possible to make out where the ocean bed to all intents and purposes ended.

The truth hit Hartnell and myself in the same moment. "Perishing Procyon! It—it's the gulf!"

Somewhere down there—under twenty miles of that horrible, murky sea—the *Helga* rested as a tomb for the gallant five of her crew. Somewhere, too—beneath pressures so titanic that the imagination reeled—dwelt the Gentle People of whom Jolos had spoken. Gentle People? All deep-water life so far discovered on any world definitely came into the monster category. There were things with great heads and jaws, poison-spines riding their bodies; spidery, nightmare creatures with blind, staring eyes that served no purpose in the icy darkness of their haunts; huge black bulks, which, with equal futility, carried bright natural lights in their gills; whip-like horrors hundreds of feet long, shining like dreadful serpents.

The fish-men didn't consider them particularly gentle, either, whether or not these creatures of the deeps were actually to blame for the blasts of poisonous vapours that occasionally came rumbling upwards.

Hartnell nudged me. I stared upwards to see the crystal casket had materialised on the topmost battlement of the city walls. Khama had come to superintend the festivities—whatever they might be.

A good deal of ritual chanting and parading took place, after which Tse-Mekko moved to a prominent position and addressed the pale-green beacon glowing on the heights.

"All is in readiness, O Khama, Goddess of Zello! Thy people are assembled and thy servants await thy word!"

Across the great, black buildings of Nuklar, across those uncounfable multitudes of waiting fish-men and Zello's mighty oceans sounded the voice. "Let the celebrations begin!"

Tse-Mekko promptly went into action. "Grand Chancellor of Zello," Jolos had called him. It certainly seemed as though our first acquaintance on this strange planet held a distinct position of authority.

There were some moments of incomprehensible chanting and then, at an invisible signal, squads of large, bulky creatures—we had seen one or two among acolytes in the temple—took up positions beside long, crude levers.

"O ineffable Khama," intoned Tse-Mekko, "in whom all men see their heart's desire, to you we dedicate these holy instruments now to be employed in their just and righteous vengeance!"

He paused, slowly moving round to face the gulf.

"Release ten!" shouted Tse-Mekko. "And ten more!"

Weight was applied to the levers. In ponderous slow-motion, two or three of the huge boulders within range of our sight tipped forward, hitting the rocky ledge with a booming sound and shaking the ocean floor before they disappeared into the canyon.

"What in Altair are they doing?" demanded Tubby. "What's the idea of going to all the trouble of chucking stones over the edge?"

Several more boulders vanished. Dull, rumbling sounds came from right and left, but in the gloom we could not know whether it was other stones falling or those previously launched bouncing against the sides of the abyss.

Then silence came—a horrible, choking silence both of physical sound and telepathic impulses. Yet through the hush I received the impression that Tse-Mekko was counting to himself—timing some vital manoeuvre.

"Ten more!" he shouted, suddenly. "Ten at the extreme limits!"

Silence closed down again once faint rumblings from the

launching had subsided. These last boulders must have been released a considerable distance away. It was a frightful silence—a quietness loaded with gloating and blood-lust from a myriad cold, fish-minds. In that moment I felt my flesh creep—for I knew the frightful significance of that “Day of Righteous Oppression.”

Weak and trembling, I awaited the minutes’ passing. Then, as I expected, came a telepathic maelstrom which brought me to my knees, retching with revulsion.

Hartnell had his arm round Pat, supporting her as she lay half-fainting against him. I saw Tubby’s face, ghastly and horrified, shining dead white behind the helmet-visor.

I managed to get a few words out. “Are—are you all right, Pat?”

“I—I think so—” She might be Dr. Levison P. Lambert by academic qualification; by ordinary, human standards she was only a girl of normal feelings and emotions who had been forced to witness a messy, cold-blooded massacre.

“Getting it this way’s even worse than having to watch it!” whispered Hartnell.

Dying agonies of leviathans in the deep travelled telepathetically to the fish-men’s brains, to be savoured and enjoyed. In turn, their impressions were re-radiated through the water more strongly, so that we ourselves could not help receiving them.

“Ten more!” shrieked Tse-Mekko. “And ten—and ten—and ten!”

The multi-ton boulders were unleashed with simple but diabolical cunning. That vast chasm in the ocean floor, we now knew, ended in rising clefts at either end. No way of escape was possible for the Gentle People, because, once mounting from natural depths into seas of less weight, internal pressure of their own bodies would burst them asunder. They could merely travel along the floor of that frightful abyss to north or south. What more natural, then, than when the first giant stones descended they should flee left and right from the scene? This was what Tse-Mekko had been so carefully timing—

release of further bombardments at specified points precisely when terrified denizens of the Lower World might be swimming past.

Thus were the depths of Zello transformed into one fantastic charnel-house, full of shapeless, writhing leviathans thrashing in death-throes, with now and again a great, shuddering sigh as one found release from its torture. And all the time delighted cries from assembled fish-men mingled with groans from below until it seemed as though Zello poised itself upon a tumultuous pinnacle of blood and pain.

"And ten!" howled Tse-Mekko. He darted left and hung, poised, in the water. "And ten—and ten!" He sped right again and waited.

The world was full of rumblings and shriekings and dark, dreadful representations. We could not shut out those terrible mind-pictures—we could only endure them.

One thing helped us retain sanity. Disturbance on the ocean bed released accumulated gases, which surged upwards some distance from where we stood in a milky cloud, churning the water as they sped towards the surface. A few warning cries of "Komola! Komola!" were lost in the uproar, but I saw how a spray of bubbles lashed across some of the fish-men and they immediately fell like stones. All four of us enjoyed together a certain vindictive satisfaction. The multitude of their companions, however, were too intoxicated by the killing and cruelty to take much notice.

The last boulders had gone. Reaction set in among the spectators—a sort of drooping pleasure, as though violent emotion had exhausted them. Khama's crystal casket had vanished from the ramparts. The assembly began to disperse.

Tse-Mekko confronted us once more, full of pride in achievement. "Magnificent, was it not? We were fortunate in our strategy—we killed well today."

I kept my mind carefully blank. I knew very well the official Inter-X reaction: "Field parties in contact with extra-terrestrial creatures must avoid criticism, either by

word or gesture, of native customs, however horrific. It is their duty to collect data, not express opinions. Individual views may run counter to considered policies worked out by Directing Panels and thereby create unnecessary difficulties."

"Now," he went on, "is the Hour of Relaxation. Later we will converse together about the wonders you have seen."

The controller would also be rather fidgety by this time, I thought, so that a brief interlude during which I might make a report would be welcome.

"Getting away from this place won't be a bad idea, either," said Tubby, fervently. "It gives me the willies."

Before long we were back again in the room with the seaweed beds, and lying thankfully on their resilient bulk. Then, struck by a sudden thought, I got up and peered through the water beneath the metal racks, passing from my own couch to those of the others.

Young Hartnell watched these proceedings with open astonishment. "What's the matter, Pop? Looking for burglars?"

I didn't think it was funny. "There's something I haven't mentioned before—I didn't want Tse-Mekko and his crowd to overhear." Whereupon I related what had transpired during the visit from Jolos.

"Hm," said Hartnell, thinking it over.

"Don't let's get mixed up in any more revolutions," pleaded Tubby. "You know what the controller said after that affair on Zeton—"

That reminded me. "You'd better all be quiet. I'm going to report—"

As usual, the controller listened to the story of Zello with the same calm detachment he might accord an account off any Sunday School picnic. When I'd finished, the "third-degree" began and, of course, he pounced on the natural telepathy.

"All inhabitants of Zello appear to possess this faculty," I said. "The fish-men, the lower orders in what they call the Middle World and the creatures of the abyss. So far as we can ascertain there is no human defence. First

manifestations are an inexplicable fear and nervousness, sometimes irritability—" I looked at Hartnell and he grinned, remembering our polite exchanges of compliments on the sand-dunes. "Once these are overcome, however, communication is certainly easy. In the opinion of this expedition, all personnel landing on Zello should be cautioned. It is not possible for human-beings to read fishermen's minds, yet they themselves observe our thoughts quite easily."

He didn't even thank me for the information. "Put Dr. Lambert on."

I switched the inter-com through to the outside transmitter and waggled my eyebrows warningly to Hartnell and Tubby, letting them know that any sound they uttered would be heard back at *Old Growler*—most probably recorded, into the bargain. This is necessary, I'm afraid, in view of the fact that these two irrepressible young devils are apt to interject frivolous comments while I'm making reports.

I've a great admiration for controllers in many ways, but obviously our present interrogator received promptings from some Scientific Panel expert. I wondered if it might actually be Toombes. Pat had to endure a long-winded technical questioning about the inhabitants of Zello while the remaining three of our party stood by in bafflement. There was a great deal of "cartilaginous sub-orders," "primitive notachords" and "teleostomi ganoids" floating about, with an occasional discourse on "acanthopetery sub-species." They even called me back again for a few words on thallophyta (the main class of marine vegetation), but here I was on home ground and gave him as good as I got.

When at last he'd asked every question he could think of we received the inevitable "Wait." Matters were being mulled over at high level.

"You will remain on Nuklar," announced the controller, at last. "It is estimated that your air reserves suffice for a further twenty-four hours. Confirm this."

"Confirmed," I said.

"The Scientific Panel agree that free exchange of knowledge is the basis of good relations between civilised communities. You are therefore authorised to use any technical data at your disposal to promote goodwill. Report further at specified time. That is all."

I switched off with a sigh of relief. "Well, that's that. Apparently we're still pals with Tse-Mekko, despite everything—"

Something was worrying young Hartnell. "You know, Pop, I can't understand why they didn't give any directive about Jolos. Are we to take notice of what he says—or just ignore him?"

I shrugged. "Work by the book, I suppose. You know what they say—no politics."

"There's another thing," said Tubby, thoughtfully. "Did I hear you right—or did you really tell the controller that Khama was a plant?"

I stared. "Of course I did. Why not?"

Pat gazed back curiously in company with the others. She even smiled wonderingly. Maybe a good 'heart-to-heart talk about fish had made her more her old self.

"A—a plant?"

"Well," I said, disgustedly, "you saw her, the same as I did. She's a plant, isn't she? Intelligent plants aren't new—we came across 'em on Orbis, even though they were right at the bottom of the evolutionary scale compared with Khama."

Hartnell leaned forward to study my face more easily. "Sure you're all right, Pop? I mean, not going barmy or seeing things in your old age?"

"Of course not!" I said, angrily.

"I was with you," said Hartnell, slowly. "I stood there beside you and looked at Khama. I certainly didn't see a plant inside that crystal casket affair. Did you, Tubby?"

Tubby shook his head.

"Or you, Pat?"

She looked at me from eyes filled with compassion and alarm. "No—Khama couldn't be a plant. Sorry, Pop!" Somehow a cold hand clutched at my heart.

"What is she, then?" I croaked.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Pit of Evil

“**I** DON'T understand it at all,” said Hartnell. “How in Cassiopea could you mistake a glorious creature like that for a vegetable?”

“I didn't say ‘vegetable’—I said ‘plant.’ The two are quite different. But I grant you she's glorious—”

Tubby, who had been thinking slowly and deeply, muttered something about it being a trick of the light.

Knowing I was in the right, I refused to accept this easy and cowardly way out. “Look here—”

Hartnell glanced at his watch. “We'll soon find out. If this Hour of Relaxation's the same length of time as one of our own hours, Tse-Mekko'll be here any minute to hustle us along for the next audience.”

Almost at the same instant he spoke, Zello's Grand Chancellor in person appeared in the entrance aperture and announced that Khama awaited our presence.

Puzzled and unhappy, I allowed myself to be towed with the others once more through Nuklar's coral labyrinths, this time along lower routes than when we had journeyed to the temple. “The audience will be in more intimate surroundings than before,” explained Tse-Mekko. “Khama bids you to her private chamber.”

This cosy little boudoir turned out to be a place about a hundred feet long and sixty feet wide, with the roof—if, indeed, it had one—lost among the dark waters high above. The pale-green crystal casket was there—and Khama, still seated on her weirdly beautiful throne of chalcedony. Her smooth, flowing leaves and tendrils moved exquisitely in the lazy, translucent waters.

I turned to Hartnell in quite triumph, only to find—uncannily enough—him looking at me in the same way.

Yet there was no time in which to argue, for Tse-Mekko introduced two large, grey-mottled things as Zello's leading scholars. Then, in that voice of musical delight, Khama said: "Now shall we exchange the information that will enable both our peoples to raise their respective cultures even higher. Henceforth shall this day be held holy in our annals—"

I started to wonder how it was possible for so elegant a creature to permit the blood-lust recently raging among her subjects, but cut off the thoughts determinedly lest they might give offence. Strictly speaking—as Inter-X laid down—it was none of my business. Yet I grew apprehensive. Premonitions? Maybe.

The proceedings began harmlessly enough.

"We understand the principle of diving suits," said Tse-Mekko. "Also that it will be necessary at some time for you to exchange the air you now use, just as we need to replenish water in our own apparatus. Yet how long must elapse ere you need to surface?"

I told him about twenty-four hours.

"So soon you must depart?" inquired Khama, with genuine regret. "But you will return as soon as possible?"

Hartnel spoke up with what I considered indecent haste and said we undoubtedly would. His eyes held the same glow of admiration we had known when first we sighted Khama. Did he still maintain she was not a plant?

"The most just manner, I suggest, is one question in turn," continued Tse-Mekko, obviously anxious to get down to business. "It shall be your privilege, as our guests, to ask the first."

Naturally, we were somewhat at a loss. Quite a number of rather bitter queries about treatment of the Gentle People came automatically to mind, and I hoped none had been "overheard." Therefore I said, rather hurriedly: "There are metal collars on your diving suits and other objects of metal here in Nuklar. How is it possible for you to work metals without fire?"

"Very good," said Hartnell, approvingly but patronisingly. "I was going to ask that—"

One of the scholars swam forward a short distance and produced the answer. "Know, O Creatures of the Air, that greater richness of life and materials exists in the sea than on the land. Therefore do we ignore the dry earth's wilderness of vegetation and obtain our needs from the waters, which have all substances in abundance. Moreover, these minerals are merely dissolved in the oceans, not being mixed inextricably with soil and stones. If, then, certain screens, capable of straining from water the required substance, be erected, it is possible to obtain finely divided deposits of pure metals—iron, tin, antimony, magnesium and gold—which may be removed as very thin plates from the screens, placed in layers one above the other and beaten into required shapes and thicknesses."

It was, indeed, an excellent and scholarly exposition. Mentally, I raised my hat to him. He gave no acknowledgment, but merely swam back into place and waited.

"Now," said Tse-Mekko, "I will place a question on behalf of Khama and the people of Zello. You shall tell us how it is possible to build ships which fly through space."

That did it! If the floor of Khama's private chamber had fallen through and dropped us into the great cleft of the Gentle People we could not have been more dumbfounded and dismayed.

I pulled myself together, since it seemed I had inherited the position of spokesman. "This is a many-sided and complicated matter. Experts and specialists must be consulted in order to—"

"Which among you are experts in such matters?"

"None of us—"

I didn't care for his changed manner a little bit. "You have broken your bargain with Khama," declared Tse-Mekko, stiffly. "A bargain is a bargain. We have answered your question, freely and openly. Now you shall answer ours."

"But there is no comparison between the two items—"

"A bargain," he snapped, "is a bargain."

Seeing me at a loss, Hartnell stepped into the breach and

outlined the theory of space flight, together with the general lay-out of a normal passenger ship.

When he had finished, Tse-Mekko was in no better temper. "That does not answer the question. It does not explain how to build a space vessel. We require technical engineering details, not elementary theories. Obviously, you wish to keep secret such information—"

He overrode my rather feeble protests quite ruthlessly.

"Zello needs but this one thing to become the mightiest nation in all the universe. Who shall then stand against us? Not puny air-men, such as yourselves, whose feeble and transparent minds we could snuff out in a twinkling of time. Conquest! Glory! All creatures of the far-flung galaxies shall know the wondrous name of Khama and tremble! It is our destiny."

It was quite dreadful. Jolos had been right in his mysterious warnings, if this had been what he tried to tell us. For the first time Tse-Mekko ceased to screen his true thoughts. It was as though I stood on the brink of some evil, reeking pit, staring horrified at the unspeakable things which squirmed and writhed in its seething black depths. What I read in that cold, maggoty fish-brain brought nausea rising bitter in my throat.

And Khama the Beautiful—she rested there on her fantastically decorated throne waving delicate tendrils in approbation. Could she be a plant? If so I'd be very happy, because plants are meek and humble and don't entertain mad ideas about conquering worlds. They occupy them, certainly, but they never oppress other creatures.

I drew a deep breath. "We do not know!" I said.

Young Hartnell added the necessary touch of bravado. "And if we did, we darned well wouldn't tell you!"

"There are—methods!" threatened Tse-Mekko, darkly.

But before he could enlarge upon the various unpleasantnesses of Zello torture chambers or whatever he had in mind, Pat thrust herself bravely forward. "This is my twopennyworth," she told us, apologetically. "It's more to do with my line of country than yours."

Whereupon she confronted the crystal throne and de-

claimed: "Hear me, O Khama. In many seas on many different worlds dwell fishes who exist in peace so far as their modes of life allow. This I know because it is my work to study them. All are numbered among the wonders of creation, from the humble mollusc to the fearful, raging killers of the deep. Yet conquest cannot be achieved without bloodshed—and who has the right to slaughter without provocation? If the Gentle People are truly responsible for deadly komolas which bubble from ocean depths there might be reason for your Day of Righteous Oppression, but what excuse shall you offer for massacres of innocents on other worlds to which you sail in space-ships?"

"Well done, Pat," I said, quietly.

Hartnell put matters more colloquially. "Nice work."

It was useless, of course. "We need no excuse for removing all who oppose Khama," said Tse-Mekko, with a sneer. "Their blood is on their own foolish heads if they resist what Fate has decreed." He swam up and down in front of us, lashing himself to a fury. "For the last time I demand—"

We stood there in stubborn silence.

He made a sudden gesture, bringing the escort of fishermen from the entrance to hover watchfully at our sides.

"First," said Khama, "it shall be the one with the dark hair who understands our species." The voice was low, even and still musical.

Resistance was hopeless. Sealed in our heavy suits, battling against density of water, all our strength went in making movement. There was neither swiftness nor energy left for fighting.

Hartnell made one desperate, feeble lunge as a couple of guards pulled Pat into the centre of the apartment, but he was hauled back immediately. I heard him raging and muttering. "What's the idea? What are they going to do?"

I couldn't answer him. If I knew, I probably wouldn't have dared to speak.

We waited there, fearing the worst.

"Pat!" yelled Hartnell. "Don't resist 'em! Tell 'em

anything—anything at all! Start talking—talking or thinking, it's all the same, but talk! Gain time! We'll try to start a diversion—"

The answer came in a brave, tremulous whisper. "I—I'm all right, really. Don't worry—I don't know much that's any use to them."

The two grey-mottled things swam close to her, halting about four feet distant.

"Keep talking!" urged Hartnell. "They'll try to hypnotise you! Keep your mind on us! Think of Pop—or me—or even Tubby! Don't give in to 'em, whatever you do!"

"I—I'll try—"

Her voice faltered and died away.

"Pat!" called Hartnell, again. "Pat! Listen—"

The only answer was a little scream of pain that wrenched at my heart. Then silence.

Raging, young Hartnell twisted and squirmed violently against his captors' grips. "Darn you!" he yelled. "Darn you!" He tried to shake his fist at Khama and Tse-Mekko, who looked calmly on.

Coldly shuddering—yet my palms were moist with sweat—I saw Pat's suit fold limply to the coral floor. Two fishermen dragged her away.

"What have they done?" demanded Hartnell. "What have the devils done to her?" I lacked the courage to remind him of what he said when Toombes first announced she was coming on the expedition with us.

Khama hadn't turned a tendril. "Next," she said, so softly that her voice might have been a caress, "it shall be the one who understands the weeds which grow on our ocean bed."

My throat seemed to constrict, making it difficult to breathe and impossible to swallow. Not that swallowing was particularly necessary, for my tongue felt swollen and dry.

They hauled me into position before the grey-mottled torturers. I wondered whether a tougher physique might cause me to endure their treatment longer than Pat. I hoped not.

"Good luck, Pop!" said Hartnell. "You'll need it!"

"Don't let 'em grind you down!" called Tubby.

The answering grin to this macabre badinage—obviously intended to raise my spirits—must have been a mere caricature.

Then they began.

There was no physical contact between myself and the fish-men. They remained hovering the same four feet away, gently moving fins to maintain their position level with my helmet visor.

Invisible fingers began to pluck at my brain—at first a mere unpleasant tickling, then a probing, deeper and deeper until violent rigours ran time after time down the sensitive nerve-core of my spine. Resistance ebbed with physical and metal stamina. In a matter of seconds I felt myself merely as a quivering wreck, with scarcely sufficient determination left not to cry out.

After a time—it might have been moments or hours—a peculiar thing happened. Against my will—despite every effort I could make to prevent it—memories began to un-reel themselves like a cinematograph strip running backwards. First our landing on Zello; the trips round Eta Herculis during our present tour; the long, weary space journey across inter-galactical wastes; landings on previous planets—all the events I had ever experienced and all the subjects I had studied—right back to my apprenticeship days in the botanical laboratories at headquarters. The scenes moved faster and faster until at length all blurred into a racing grey strip that grew progressively darker and darker and then completely black.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Little Growler *Under Siege*

I OPENED my eyes to infinite weariness, seeing dark-green water ascending to the limit of vision. I was lying on hard coral in a place that I did not know—somewhere in a corner of the temple, I imagined. Perhaps at the bottom of one of those floorless towers which had struck me previously as making safe dungeons for human prisoners.

Hartnell, Tubby and Pat lay beside me. I looked at my watch. It had been three hours since that dreadful, exhausting ordeal in Khama's "boudoir."

Over the inter-com came sounds of faint, regular breathing. So the others weren't dead, either. Why had we been spared? What was likely to happen to us now?

Hartnell was first of the three to regain consciousness. He eased himself against the uncomfortable rock and summoned a wan smile. "Hello, Pop. Still in the land of the living, are we?"

I moved an arm to indicate the confines of our prison. "If you like to call it that."

We fell silent again, watching Pat and Tubby. There was nothing we could do to help—no means of applying stimulant-salts to their nostrils, giving sips of water or any other first-aid measures. For all physical purposes each of us was entirely alone in his or her diving suit—a prisoner in a double prison.

They came round a few minutes later.

"Are you all right, Pat?" asked Hartnell, anxiously.

"I—I think so—"

Tubby blew out his cheeks despondently. "So that's the sort of thing they're able to do. Well, I hope my stuff about inter-nuclear cameras and infra-red focus proves a

very great help to 'em. Nice look-out, though, for any planet Khama ever manages to land her gang on—"

Young Hartnell shook his head in mystification. "I don't get it," he confessed. "To see her sitting there on that throne, speaking in that lovely voice, and her hair waving gently in the water—"

I jerked myself upright, gasping and incredulous. "Her hair—?"

He seemed surprised for a moment. "Why, of course! Oh, I forgot—you didn't get a good look at her, did you, Pop? You thought she was a plant—"

"Look here," I said, in exasperation. "Are we going through all that again? Of course she's a plant!"

They looked at me wide-eyed, until Pat slowly moved her head round to transfer the stare to Hartnell. "Did you say—hair?"

"Why not?" asked Tubby.

"Because," said Pat, slowly, in a way that made goose-pimples rise all along my arms, "she hasn't got any hair."

There was an appalled silence. I'd have given a fortune for the privilege of running my hands in desperation through my own hair.

Then Hartnell whistled, long and now. "I think I'm beginning to understand! Now let's get this straight. Khama sits on a throne of some sort of greenish stone inside a transparent casket-arrangement. Right?"

We all agreed that was correct so far.

"Now then, Pop—what did you see sitting on that throne?"

"You already know," I said, grumpily. "The most wonderful plant I've ever laid eyes on."

"And you, Pat—did you see her as—a fish?"

"Yes," she said, wonderingly. "The most graceful and exquisite fish in the universe! There simply couldn't be one more beautiful—" She broke off and her mouth made a little "O" of astonishment. "But how did you know?"

Hartnell didn't answer. "Tubby?"

Tubby automatically tried to scratch his chin in puzzlement, but succeeded, quite naturally, in merely rubbing the

helmet-visor. "Well—I don't know—maybe it's those hallucinations or something—"

"Come on—tell us what you saw?"

"Well, I hardly like to—" He gulped down his embarrassment. "Oh, all right. If you must know. I took her for a girl!"

"Don't be coy about it," said Hartnell. "I saw her as a girl, too." He waxed enthusiastic. "And what a girl! Believe me, if I'd had a good, stout crowbar with me that glass box affair'd be in splinters now! And that hair—as blonde and shining as straw-coloured gold—"

Tubby let out a squawk of protest. "Blonde? You colour-blind or something? It was the most gorgeous red I've ever come across—"

"She's a blonde, I tell you!"

"A red-head!"

This could have gone on for ever. "Look here," I said, "what's the answer? Didn't you tell us you were beginning to understand?"

Hartnell let himself out of the schoolboy squabble and explained. "Think what it means. Pat saw a world-beating fish; you saw a plant of baffling beauty; Tubby saw a red-head and I saw a blonde. The truth, of course, is that Khama's none of 'em! Remember one of those high-falutin' phrases Tse-Mekko used? He was staring at her on the battlements just before they started heaving those darned great stones into the gulf and—as I remember the words—he said 'O ineffable Khama, in whom all men see their heart's desire . . .!'" He grinned wickedly. "Nice to know Pop's keeping to the straight and narrow in his old age—"

Being too dumbfounded for argument, I let him get away with it. The idea was certainly ingenious and, remembering the mental powers of Zello's inhabitants, not too far-fetched. What was it Toombes had said back at the ship? "Artificially-induced hallucinations . . ."

"I think," said Hartnell, slowly, "we ought to call the controller and warn him. We're up against a really tough proposition this time."

We regarded each other despondently. There was one ray of hope. "At least," I said, "they'll never learn from us how to build a ship—because we don't know!"

"Exactly! But suppose—whatever happens to us—that there's an engineer in some other expedition—"

The possibility was appalling. A dreadful vision came into my mind of water-filled space-ships carrying the creatures of Zello to all inhabited worlds—invincible by reason of their power to dominate other intelligences, building their cities beneath all the seas and laying waste the land they despised.

I switched on the outside transmitter. "Outside party on Zello calling controller . . . outside party on Zello calling controller . . ." I waited.

Hartnell frowned. "Better try the emergency frequency."

"I'm already on the emergency frequency."

"Surely they've switched it through back at *Little Growler*?"

I renewed the call. "Zello party calling Ship 46B. Are you receiving us?"

Only the faint hiss of static reached our ears. What could be happening? A technical failure was unthinkable. Inter-X radio circuits don't break down.

Then came a low, trembling moan. "Is that you, Markeson?" I shouted, desperately.

"No . . . Willson . . ."

"What's the matter? Why isn't the emergency channel through to *Old Growler*?"

"I—I—"

There was the same terror in Willson's voice that we had heard from men aboard the *Helga*.

"Listen! Willson! Put us through to the ship!"

The moaning was resumed. "I—I daren't—I'm—I'm afraid—they're all round the ship—waiting!"

"Switch us through, darn you!" I ground my teeth viciously. "Reach up and switch us through."

"I—I—"

Couldn't the panic-stricken fool realise what depended on getting the message through?

"They're trying to capture the ship!" exclaimed Hartnell. "They found we couldn't tell 'em how to build one, so they're after a working model!"

"Can they get in?" asked Pat, anxiously.

"Not if Markeson and Willson have got their wits about 'em. In any case, Tse-Mekko's made a tactical error. If the fish-men are using telepathy from outside our chaps'll be so scared they'll lock themselves in good and tight."

"For a start!" admitted Tubby, grimly. "But once Tse-Mekko's lot get the upper hand—"

"Willson!" I cried. "Don't be afraid! It's only the fish-men's telepathy! Don't be afraid, I tell you!"

The static hissed again. I opened my mouth for one last, desperate plea. Then: "Controller here. Controller here—"

I could have wept with relief. Even to this day I can't understand how I managed to put matters so crisply. Some subconscious inspiration must have forced upon my brain the fact that no time must be wasted. "Fish-men trying to gain control of Scout Ship 46B, with Willson aboard—"

He didn't wait for the rest. "Controller calling Ship 46B. What is happening?"

Willson was still moaning. We could understand the awful struggle he must be enduring with those evil, invisible forces.

Another voice broke into the ether, shattering Inter-X procedure completely. "Listen to me, Willson! This is Toombes! Tell me what's happened—"

The story came in gasps. "Markeson . . . he came at me with an iron bar . . . I had to . . . hit him . . . don't think he's dead . . . squirming things all round the ship . . . afraid . . . they want me to open the space-port . . ."

"No!" said Toombes. He didn't raise his voice, but the emphasis was there all right. "Keep the ship locked. At all costs—at all costs! Understand?"

"I—I—can't! I daren't! They're telling me to open the air-lock—"

I wondered if Toombes was sweating to the same extent that we were. Poor Willson couldn't resist those dreadful

telepathic commands much longer. It wasn't much good sending a further expedition, either, because all humans must immediately fall beneath that same mesmeric spell. And once Tse-Mekko's experts had a scout ship to examine at their leisure—well, only a fool would underrate either their intelligence or their ingenuity.

"I—I've got to do it!" gasped Willson. "I've got to, I tell you! I'm going there now—"

"Listen!" said Toombes. "Listen to me! The first-aid kit—on the wall! See it? Knock down Case No. 2 as you pass! Understand? Smash it down on the floor!"

Bewildered, I turned to look at Hartnell, seeing his jaw drop ludicrously in sudden understanding.

A half-heard crash and tinkle came to our ears. Apparently Willson had knocked down the first-aid box. So what?

"Willson!" called Toombes. "Willson! Answer me!"

When all remained silent, Hartnell and I sighed simultaneously in satisfaction.

Pat's eyes asked questions.

"Case No. 2," I said, "holds those ampoules of anæsthetic gas—"

"Oh, I see."

"It'll keep him quiet for the next twelve hours or more," said Hartnell, highly gratified. "Markeson, too." He laughed. "I'll bet those fish-faces feel now as though they're beating their brains against a brick wall!"

"No doubt!" said Toombes, dryly. "Controller calling outside party on Zello—" Those were the words that reached us, but the voice was still unmistakable. Toombes had apparently taken over. Immediate urgency concluded, formality once more became the order of the day. "Controller calling. Explain motives of inhabitants in endeavouring to enter Scout Ship 46B."

"Their wish is to accomplish space flight," I said. "Admitted object the forcible colonisation of all worlds within reach. There is little doubt that by mass telepathy they tried to force down the *Helga*—er—that is, Scout Ship 46E, to secure knowledge of construction. Indications are, how-

ever, that too vigorous emanations caused vessel to crash."

"Wait."

We waited. I wondered what he expected us to do. Tubby had been prowling slowly round the coral walls of our prison. He swayed towards us and spread his hands dolefully. There was no way out, apparently, save upwards.

"Controller calling. What are the inhabitants' present intentions towards yourselves?"

"Undoubtedly hostile." That was one way of putting it.

"Can you suggest any method whereby their telepathic abilities might be countered?"

"None."

"Wait."

"Rats in a trap—that's what we are," said Tubby, despondently.

"Speak for yourself," said Hartnell. "In a trap, maybe—but I don't much care for the description. Besides, we've got ladies present."

Pat chuckled. I don't know how she managed it. I certainly didn't feel much like laughing myself. "That's all right, Tubby. I don't mind rats, but I simply hate mice!"

"Shush!" I said. "He's coming back."

"Controller calling. The Scientific Panel view the situation with exceptional gravity. All possible counter-action is being taken from this headquarters, but it is not considered advisable to commence definite hostile action on a large scale—" What he really meant was that the big-shots quailed at open warfare and, as Hartnell pointed out later, *Old Growler* in any case wasn't equipped for offensive measures. "In the circumstances, further expeditions will depart immediately in the hope of recovering Scout Ship 46B. Estimated times of arrival between 0800 and 0930 hours, Solar Standard Rating. You are hereby authorised to take any measures—repeat, any measures whatever—within your power to reach the vessel before take-off, which will occur immediately the first crew arrives."

"They—they're going to leave us here?" asked Pat, in a small, tremulous voice.

Hartnell nodded.

"I am directed by the Scientific Panel," continued Toombes, "to express their warmest regard for your devotion to duty and the way in which, despite considerable difficulties, you have succeeded in transmitting a warning that may save nations throughout the confines of explored space from falling victims to unimaginable tyranny."

"A well-deserved epitaph!" muttered Tubby, bitterly. "Very comforting, I'm sure!"

"Just a minute," I said into the microphone, and Hartnell flickered a grin at this sudden lapse into informality. Personally, I was past caring, but there was one thing I'd like to know. "Am I right in guessing you had an idea what it was all about before we started out for Zello?"

"We suspected what they were after," admitted Toombes, no longer standing on his dignity as a controller. "That's why no member with engineering experience was included in your party. But you volunteered, didn't you?" He paused to let this fact sink in. "Anyway—best of luck. Get back to the ship before take-off if you can. We'll listen all the time in case you've anything to tell us. Good-bye."

I switched off.

There was a brief silence.

"How long have we got?" asked Hartnell.

I looked at my watch. He could very well have done the same, but I suppose he wanted us to talk instead of brooding. "About four hours."

He craned his neck, staring into the murky heights. "Any plan about how we might get out of here?"

None of us took the trouble to answer.

"Don't worry," said Tubby, suddenly. "We're going to get out all right! They're coming to fetch us now!"

A dozen or more dark shapes swooped from above, headed by Tse-Mekko. Unceremoniously, we were grabbed by arms and legs and hauled upwards. Knowing from experience about our slow, ponderous progression in the heavy suits, they wasted no time with waiting for laborious walkers, but towed us swiftly into one of the main thoroughfares and along towards Nuklar's outermost bastions.

On a battlement above the terrifying chasm where we had been forced to witness the loathsome ceremonies of "oppression" they propped us on our feet and paused. Waters of the pit spread darkly before us.

"There is no place in Zello's civilisation for those who are useless," proclaimed Tse-Mekko, with vindictive satisfaction. "You are useless to us, now that we have garnered all the puny knowledge at your disposal. Therefore, Khama the Beneficent has bade us be rid of you."

She was there again on the topmost rampart, seated on the wonderful throne inside her casket of pale-green crystal. I looked with horror and hatred, half-hoping she knew what passed through my mind.

Despite small doubt about their intentions, Tse-Mekko had to gloat. "So, O Creatures of the Air, we send you hence. Your pitying concern for creatures of the abyss on whom we wreak justifiable vengeance adds justice to the manner of your execution. Lo, we send you to join them!"

As though in loud-voiced protest at such outrage, a "komola" thundered and rumbled its way towards the surface some distance away.

"Therefore," cried Tse-Mekko, "go! Go in the knowledge that you are the first of many sacrifices from among those of your kind to the greater glory of Khama!"

Something pushed me violently in the small of the back and I tumbled over and over through the water. As I went I caught a last glimpse of Khama. For one dreadful moment I thought she might be visible in her true form of indescribable hideousness—but no, she sat there in exquisite, green-leaved beauty, gently nodding her emerald-and-gold head amid streaming tendrils.

No farewell message came from her as the ramparts slid past my facepiece and I sank slowly into the abyss.

CHAPTER NINE

A Word With the Gentle People

AT the beginning of that terrifying plunge I had neither voice nor hearing for the others. Whether they had preceded me or whether they followed I didn't know.

The motor in my suit started up automatically again, whining shrilly with its duty of pumping. Ear-drums clicked rapidly, making me gulp to equalise the pressure.

Down . . . down . . .

Desperately I tried to keep track of distance, searching with bulging eyes amid increasing darkness for some projection to which I might cling.

Down . . . down . . . down . . .

The note of the motor dropped a semitone. It hadn't been built for such work and the load began to drag. Once I felt the heavy-soled shoe scrape past rock, but although I flung myself desperately towards it my flailing arms caught nothing.

Down . . . down . . .

It was pitch dark. Pressure seemed to be forcing my tongue out by the roots and a red mist, uncannily bright after the stygian gloom, floated across my vision. The straining little motor reduced its progress to a slow chugging. Swallowing now served no purpose in lessening the drumming in my head. Brilliant sparks commenced to shoot across the pinkish mist, each sending a corresponding dart of pain through swollen eyeballs. Constriction squeezed all my limbs in unbearable tingling sensations and every joint might well have been lined with grit.

Then I caught hold of something. Reflex action alone must have closed my fingers upon it, for I had no completely conscious knowledge of what it was or how it came there. I just grabbed and held, panting agonisingly with

the air that forced itself into all the tiny crevices of my lungs.

The exhaust valve blew with a fantastic roar. I remembered thinking: "This is the end—the suit's split!" Invisible needles stabbed my flesh by thousands, but my tongue relaxed and it seemed as though the eyeballs eased themselves back into my skull again as the pressure fell. The motor remained silent.

There was only one explanation—but it didn't penetrate my battered consciousness immediately. The thing to which I clung was pulling me nearer the surface! And it possessed a strangely familiar shape.

Then I knew! Jolos! The long, sinewy tentacle which had pulled me inside the temple of Khama for that brief, earnest warning. Or, perhaps, since I had never seen Jolos and only knew that the grey, rubbery thing which the fish-men had torn in pieces near the shore was "one of his friends," it might be a tail. Frankly, I didn't care much; I just held on and was thankful.

Two or three times I brushed against rock during the ascent, then it seemed as though I was tugged into some kind of underwater cave beneath the foundations of Nuklar, for direction suddenly changed and I found myself lying face downwards on rock. The release valve blew again, although not so vigorously. I lay there panting, letting relief pour over me in a healing wave.

After a time I felt better, but instead of starting telepathic exercises of gratitude my first thought was for the rest of the Inter-X squad. "Where are you? Can anybody hear me?"

"Right beside you, Pop," said Hartnell, cheerfully. "We're all here together—only you went down a bit farther than we did before Jolos could make a grab."

"So I imagined," I told him, dryly. "I take it you've met Jolos?"

"He completes our merry little party in this comfortable, self-contained flatlet—he and a couple of his pals. They guessed what would happen and waited till we went over the top."

"How about you, Pat?"

"Fine, thanks. In any case, I'm more used to this kind of thing. Poor Tubby's panting a bit—" Being thrown into submarine caverns and grabbed round the waist by sea-creatures was apparently all in the day's work for her. I was glad I stuck to vegetables.

Then Jolos came through. "We rejoice, O Strangers, in being able to save you from Tse-Mekko's evil designs—"

I expressed our appreciation as graciously as possible and added: "We might as well have a little light on the subject." For the first time since we had descended beneath the surface, I pressed the headlamp switch, slicing a brilliant beryllium beam through the blackness of that cave. Exclamations of wonder came from Jolos and Co., whom we immediately identified as resembling in shape the unfortunate watcher.

"Truly, this is a great marvel!" said Jolos. "None save the Gentle People are known to possess such gifts!"

Pat provided a hurried whisper of confirmation. "That's right, you know! Practically all the deep-sea fish carry illumination—even though many of them are blind—"

"It would be a great honour," went on Jolos, wistfully, "if we might introduce you to the Gentle People."

Hartnell said, quite bluntly, that he'd rather concentrate on reaching dry land again—to save his own skin as well as fly off *Little Growler* before the fish-men captured it.

"We understand," said Jolos, rather crestfallen. "We understand, of course. Yet Tse-Mekko's men may swim down to investigate and there is only one hiding place—a forest some miles from here—where you may be safe until their suspicions are at rest and they consider you to have perished. In the heart of this forest, moreover, is a certain spot where, for unexplained reasons, the words of the Gentle People may clearly be heard—perhaps loudly enough for you to comprehend."

I shrugged. "In that case, what can we lose?"

Two or three other long-tailed creatures arrived and between them—with a couple scouting ahead for possible dangers—they towed us in ludicrous convoy through the darkness fully five hundred feet below the surface.

"You know, Pop," said Pat, "I'm getting quite used to this way of travel—"

"Maintain complete absence of thought," urged Jolos. "Also extinguish the wonderful lamp, that we may not be detected by Tse-Mekko's' watchers."

His party were obviously experts in moving unauthorised around Nuklar. They plugged steadily along in an irregular, zigzagging course until at last the great shelf of rock on which the city rested fell away into wild, tangled "countryside." Large stones and chunks of coral strewn themselves haphazardly among high, streaming banners of dark-green weed. Some of the roots were fully a foot across at the base, emerging from a maze of weird undergrowth to form an almost impassable submarine jungle. Hundreds of giant sea-anemones lazily waved their deadly, stubby tentacles to ensnare incautious fish; clams snapped shut their razor-edged shells like traps at our approach; wriggling things abandoned their ceaseless quest for food and burrowed deep into the ooze which rose smoking from where we trod. Amid this horrible forest our helpers had no opportunity to speed our progress, for while they themselves might swim sinuously through gaps between the weeds, our own more bulky bodies needed a suitable pause during which to press aside the tough, fibrous branches.

"Here we halt," said Jolos, at last. "Beyond the next barrier of vegetation lies another precipice leading to the gulf. I will proceed ahead to announce your coming."

Groaning, Tubby sank down on a suitable tuft of seaweed. "I think the same as Hartnell. We ought to be finding a way back to the shore instead of wandering round unholy places like this."

"Oh, no, no!" cried Pat, indignantly. "Why—it's wonderful! Even if we never get back it's been worth every minute!"

There, I thought with reluctant admiration, spoke a girl of true Inter-X spirit. And I paid her this mental compliment despite the sympathy I felt with Tubby's point of view and the fact that, strictly speaking, she didn't belong in the somewhat exclusive ranks of Inter-X.

"And if we really do get in touch with the Gentle People," she went on, eyes shining with excited anticipation, "I simply won't care! Don't you see what it means? After us there'll be others who'll find their way to Zello—maybe long after Khama and Tse-Mekko are dead—but the Gentle People will remember and tell them about us! Why, we'll actually be a legend! The first humans to—" In the dim, green light she caught sight of Hartnell's mocking smile and broke off in confusion. "Sorry—I was a bit carried away—"

"Never mind," I said, in so fatherly a tone that Tubby started grinning, too. "That's exactly the sort of enthusiasm we all feel in Inter-X now and again. Only moving on from world to world sometimes loses its novelty. We're probably legends already on quite a number of planets—only," I added, anxious to squash those two young devils' cynicism, "instead of legends some people's names might be used as awful warnings—"

I threw them a meaning glance, but they only laughed.

Jolos pulled aside long strands of weed. "Come," he said, simply. "There is a little distance to travel, but move with caution—"

During the brief journey I asked him something about the Gentle People's way of life. "Have they a civilisation? Although they may be more advanced in humane thinking than Tse-Mekko's nation, do they understand technical matters?"

The answer came as something of a shock. "Indeed, they know more, since it was their knowledge that found its way into the Upper World. The sifting and beating of metals, for instance, since metal, being heavier than water or earth, drifts and sinks to the lowest point of the ocean. Their deposits of minerals are immensely rich. So, too, the art of building with coral and the employment of other creatures in duties most suitable for their talents. Yet servants of the Lower World, working in the Gentle People's enormous palaces, are well-treated instead of being killed and persecuted, as are me and my kind."

Frankly, I'd imagined the Gentle People to spend their

time merely swimming aimlessly round and round in the darkness dodging boulders. Yet down there—cut off by the unbelievable weight of twenty miles of water—they had built a civilisation, culture and industry. One thing, however, was certain—we would never see it.

"He's quite right about those mineral deposits, of course," said Pat. "Everything does tend to move to the lower depths. That's how all the deep-sea creatures live—by scavenging. After all, in upper waters big fishes feed on little ones, but the small ones have to eat something. Mostly it's those microscopic plants called plankton. You're a botanist, Pop—you ought to know about that. But plants won't grow without sunlight and there's no light at all more than half-a-mile down. I don't know whether the Gentle People are too educated to eat each other, but apart from themselves they can't have anything except debris. Some of the plankton dies and sinks right to the bottom, along with quite a big proportion of animal life that doesn't meet a violent end. When stuff over an area as big as an ocean collects anywhere it's quite a lot of material.

Then Jolos bade us lie on the edge of the abyss with our heads protruding over the side, while he hovered in the water some little distance away.

We waited, straining in concentration, but sensing naught save the thumping of our hearts. Although pressure was endurable, depth remained too great for comfort. From time to time the seaweed trees rustled tough fronds in the sway of an occasional current, and small jellyfish swam past.

"He is here!" said Jolos, suddenly. "It is he—Konsoll, elected leader of the Gentle People!"

Elected? They had democracy, too?

I "listened," bringing all my concentration to bear. There was nothing.

"Perhaps I could translate—" began Jolos.

"No—please, no!" said Pat. "I'd like to hear for myself—"

The effort of concentration brought sweat rolling down the back of my neck. Was it—? Yes it was!

Across some unimaginable psychic void sounded a tiny, alien "voice"—at first almost too faint to perceive, but rapidly becoming fully intelligible as rapport was established. A very small, high-pitched voice—at least, that's how it struck me. Not at all the tone that matched a mental picture of huge, rolling leviathans of the lower depths.

"Greetings!" said the tiny voice, with profound sincerity. "Greetings, O Strangers of the Air!"

"We've done it!" yelled Hartnell, gleefully. "Darn it all—we've done it! Aren't you glad you stayed?"

"It's them!" said Tubby, awed and ungrammatical. "It's really them!"

"Well!" exclaimed Pat, indignantly. "Well, I like that! After the way you behaved just now because I got a little excited—"

"It just shows how much attention you need pay to anything they say," I told her. "Never mind, though—let's listen again."

Communication proceeded apace. "Greetings in the name of the Gentle People!" said that piping voice. "I Konsoll, convey to you our sympathy in Tse-Mekko's persecution."

The others seemed to be leaving it to me, as usual, so I made appropriate reply.

"How grievous that none seems safe from Khama's enmity—neither ourselves, the people of Jolos, the creatures who recently plunged upon us in their metal walls, nor thou, O Strangers. Yet such is the nature of things that we are all defenceless against these assaults—"

Creatures in metal walls? That must be the *Helga*!

"They were our companions," I told him, soberly. "Men of our race whom Tse-Mekko lured to destruction. Where do they lie now?"

"Oh, no!" said Konsoll, decidedly. "No, they could not be of your race!"

I lifted my head to stare at Hartnell with mounting horror. Not of our race? Then who—?

Deep in the gulf the Gentle People sensed our bewilder-

ment. Somehow I knew that many of them swarmed close to their leader for this fantastic ceremony.

"No," repeated Konsoll, although there was inoffensive gentleness in his very determination. "The picture we receive from Jolos presents you in quite different shape."

At that moment the full, sickening realisation dawned. How could those five men aboard the *Helga* "present the same shape" under awful pressures on the floor of the abyss? And the cylindrical ship was no longer a ship—only "peculiar metal walls." The wonder was that the *Helga* hadn't been crushed to powder.

Swallowing my nausea, I explained. He grasped the reason with lively intelligence and through those miles of water there mounted from the Gentle People assembled beside him a sensation of quick, warm sympathy.

"Then since that had to be their fate," proceeded Konsoll, "I am glad. For in spite of everything we recognised them as rational beings and built a temple round them in what is to us one of the most lovely parts of the Lower World. In this shrine they shall rest for ever as the first of your race to land upon Zello."

My eyes inexplicably began to water. I blinked and swallowed, then went on: "V'e crave a favour. Men of our kind sleep on many worlds throughout the universe, and the places are marked in a fashion that all men know. Since you understand the system of beating metal into plates, is it possible that certain markings may be inscribed—"

With quiet dignity, but no hint of reproof, he said: "Writings are known to us, O Strangers. So, also, to you, since engravings are to be found upon the metal walls in which your comrades were entrapped. I will picture them for you—'Inter-X Scout Ship 46E.' The message is, of course, quiet meaningless—"

"The *Helga*!" I said. "It really is the *Helga*!"

"Poor devils!" said Hartnell, quietly. "I don't suppose they ever knew what was happening, though."

In return, I pictured for Konsoll the crew's epitaph. Eyes of no man would ever rest upon so strange a tomb-

stone, yet it was with satisfaction that I knew they had been honoured according to Inter-X custom.

"It shall be done," promised Konsoll, soberly. "Although we do not understand your mention of 'light' and 'reading,' there are methods whereby markings may be inscribed on raised metal and the meaning becomes clear to he who passes a tentacle or fin understandingly across the surface and pictures the message by touch."

"Well," said Hartnell, abruptly, masking his true feelings with a certain gruffness, "unless we get out of here they'll have to start manufacturing tombstones for us. Say goodbye and let's be on our way. We've only a couple of hours—"

Konsoll, however, hadn't finished. "We have heard of Khama's wish to dominate the universe. That is an evil thing—more evil than the boulders which are thrown down to crush our palaces and bury dying people hideously in the ruins. We have heard of Tse-Mekko's death sentence upon you, which is a loathsome thing to our minds, since we do not believe in unnecessary killings—" The tiny voice from the chasm paused, then resumed. "How may we help? Is there nothing we can do to join you and other races in opposing this menace?"

What could they do? The Gentle People were prisoners of the abyss. They dared not swim within five or six miles of us, lest their bodies rupture; no other creatures—not even Jolos and his friends—could descend more than a comparatively short distance before being killed by water pressure.

Come to that, what could we ourselves do, seeing that human minds were so easily dominated by the fish-men's mental bludgeoning?

"Nothing," I said, hopelessly. "There is nothing any of us may do."

With the example of the *Helga* fresh in our memories, there seemed little chance of further ships landing safely on Zello. Tse-Mekko's intelligence was not to be underrated, and he would obviously be prepared for further expeditions arriving to seek us. Toombes' ingenious idea of

foiling telepathic influence on Willson and Markeson could be only temporary, since as soon as the two recovered the fish-men would immediately bend them to Khama's will and *Little Growler* would be seized.

It was at this moment that I reached the end of these gloomy reflections and prepared to bid Konsoll a ceremonious farewell that young Hartnell suddenly gave an absurd exclamation. I thought it sounded like "Wukk!" or "Chukk!"

"What's the matter?" asked Pat, in alarm. "Are you all right?"

His lean, brown countenance was wreathed in a beaming smile. "Of course they can help!" he yelled. "I've just thought of a way!"

"But how in Andromeda—?"

"Don't bother now, Pop! Let me talk to 'em!"

On occasions when I've been operating the Mattus machine, Hartnell has had to stand by waiting, unable to "overhear" the telepathic interchanges. Now our positions were reversed and I, in turn, knew the almost intolerable suspense of curiosity.

"I don't like this," said Tubby, uneasily. "You remember Hartnell's brain-waves in the past—"

How, indeed, could we forget some of them? Admittedly, they had so far worked out all right—to everyone's surprise—but the proceeding was always fraught with considerable danger. Gloomily, I wondered whether his luck—and ours—would hold. I sighed. Whatever foolhardiness young Hartnell had in mind we could hardly be in worse plight than at present.

"Confound it!" muttered Hartnell, after a while. "I thought you said they were intelligent! Why can't they grasp a simple principle of physics?"

"But what d'you want 'em to do?"

Instead of answering, he scrambled to his feet. "Look, maybe if I got a bit lower down—"

Jolos paused doubtfully. "Sides of the abyss at this point are steep. It would also be perilous because of currents. Perhaps two of my men might help you to a ledge

that lies nearly three hundred feet farther down—"

My heart leaped in alarm. "Don't do it, you young fool! You'll never stand the pressure! Let's see if we can't get back to the shore—" At the same time I knew that once Hartnell made a decision there was no dissuading him.

We watched him, suspended in the grip of two sinewy tails, sink swiftly into the dark waters.

"Be careful!" I called over the inter-com.

"He shouldn't have done it!" whispered Pat, overwrought. "He oughtn't to have gone down! Look, Pop, get him back! I'm more used to diving than he is—I could let Konsoll know—"

"He'll be all right," I said, gruffly. The words were spoken in hopes of reassuring myself as well as the girl. Anxiety lay in a hard, icy knot beneath my midriff. I remembered the distinct unpleasantness of my own plunge into the depths; even so, it was not so far as Hartnell planned to descend. I stared into the blackness of the chasm, wondering where he was.

A sudden scurry in the watery jungle nearby brought one of Jolos's friends towards us with an audible rattling of seaweed fronds. Jolos, in turn, darted across to us after brief consultation. "We must leave! Tse-Mekko's men are searching the forest. Quickly—it is our only chance!"

"But what about Hartnell?" I cried, desperately. "We must wait—"

"It is him—or all of us!" answered Jolos, as coldly logical as an Inter-X instruction manual.

I caught Pat's gasp of horror. "Surely we're not going to—"

"You try to reach the ship, Pat," said Tubby. "Hide somewhere till the relief party lands. We'll follow on."

Her firm jaw set itself with determination. "Not likely! We'll stick together! Hartnell can't be long—"

It wasn't the first time that Inter-X rules had been flung overboard—nor, I guessed would it be the last. Common sense was on the side of the authorities, of course, in demanding that duty be placed before friendship, yet officials who sat in the vast administration building back at head-

quarters framing dry, bloodless regulations must secretly have realised the hopelessness of defying human ties. A verdict of guilty on any such serious charge before an Inter-X tribunal could wreck a man's career. Or a woman's, for that matter—but Dr. Levison P. Lambert had made her decision regardless.

I looked at Tubby long and hard. He stared back for a moment, then grinned and winked.

"Now what's the matter?" demanded Pat.

"Oh, nothing," I told her. "Just thinking what someone once said about a 'back room zoologist with a long, grey beard'!"

Meanwhile, Jolos fidgeted impatiently. "It is fatal to delay! Soon the searchers will close their ranks—"

"You think Tse-Mekko knows we're somewhere in this forest?"

"I am certain he does. We must have been overheard—"

In decency, after the help he had rendered us, I felt obliged to grant him his release. "We cannot forsake our friend. You and your men must save yourselves—"

He didn't like this at all, and I sensed an inward struggle against natural, logical reasoning.

"Perhaps," he said, at last, "it is best that we go. But we will watch from secret places and assist you in whatever way we can. The two who hold up your companion in the chasm will bring him out if possible—"

Another scout arrived, pausing nose-to-nose with Jolos to make his report. The message was passed to us in all its frightening import. "As I feared, we are surrounded. Now it is for every man to seek safety in his own way. Farewell, O Strangers of the Air!"

He and the others promptly darted into the waving jungle. We were alone.

CHAPTER TEN

Salvation From the Abyss

THIS, then, was the position. We cowered on the edge of that frightful chasm cutting Zello's ocean floor, temporarily hidden among submarine vegetation. Around, in a wide semi-circle between ourselves and the shore, Tse-Mekko's searchers closed in remorselessly, pausing from time to time in the hope of overhearing thought-echoes which might provide a direction bearing. Others guarded the beach itself, performing the double duty of watching our ship and preventing us from emerging on dry land should he manage to evade the drag-net. Massed ranks of fish-men hovered above the dark, frowning towers of Nuklar—a concentrated formation of telepathic power similar to those mockingly named "Choirs of Greeting" which had trapped the *Helga*—ready to force down any relief vessel. Finally, on the opposite side of the abyss, stretched a line of fish-men for the purpose of preventing Jolos and his friends towing us across into the comparative safety of more distant seas. These squads, fortunately, remained a respectful distance away—no doubt because of methane gas from lower depths or because once over the gulf they ran the danger of mental battles with the Gentle People.

Softly, I called Hartnell once or twice on the inter-com, but there was no reply. Waters at our feet, where the ocean-bed disappeared abruptly, stretched black and forbidding.

"He's been gone quite a time," said Pat, uneasily. "I hope he's all right—"

"If the fool had only told us what he's up to," fretted Tubby. "He's always the same, though, when he gets these hare-brained schemes—"

"But what in the name of Altair's the idea?" I demanded, helplessly. "If the Gentle People knew any way of hitting back at Khama they'd have done it before now."

"Remember they don't believe in unnecessary killing—"

Nor did we for that matter, yet the Scientific Panel had authorised us to "take any measures—repeat, any measures whatever" to combat Tse-Mekko's mad ambition. But if affairs degenerated into open combat with the fish-men what could we do? Strangle them with our bare hands? I doubted if we would even get within grasping distance before being smashed into madness by telepathic beams. Moreover, we had probably only survived so far because Tse-Mekko remained unaware of our exact whereabouts. Once located, what was to prevent his calling down the powers of the "massed choirs" upon us? Frankly, the prospect brought me out in a cold sweat. Only consolation was that we shouldn't know much about it.

"Where the devil's Hartnell?" asked Tubby, again. "What's he up to?"

"At least, those two pals of Jolos haven't bobbed up again, so they've still got him in tow."

"But why doesn't he answer? We haven't heard a word since he went down—"

If Hartnell felt anything like I did under that hammering pressure another couple of hundred feet below where we stood he was probably incapable of speaking.

A fizz of bubbles rose swiftly through the dark waters. A minor "komola"? Hartnell's exhaust valve blowing as he neared our own level again? Or—a split suit and disaster? I felt myself trembling uncontrollably. The suspense was maddening. And all the time we started violently at each abnormal rustle of the seaweed undergrowth, thinking Tse-Mekko's searchers might be upon us.

And then—with inexpressible relief—I saw two grey, rubbery bodies rise slowly from the chasm, their sinewy tails hooked round a space suit, which they deposited upon the chasm's edge.

Hartnell was in bad shape, almost unconscious. His

eyes—dazed and purple with congestion—were still open; blood ran in generous trickles from nostrils and ears. Unceremoniously, we dragged him into the forest.

"Let me see him!" said Pat, urgently. Her pale brow furrowed with anxiety, she peered into the helmet and tried to make diagnosis. Once again there was nothing we could do—Hartnell, like the rest of us, was a prisoner in a world limited to a diving suit.

"I don't think he's too bad," she said. "May take some time for him to come round, though, and perhaps he'll be sorry for himself when he does."

But as she spoke I saw expression return to Hartnell's eyes and his almost white lips twist themselves into a semblance of the old, mocking grin I knew so well. "I made it!" he said, happily. He tried to rise to his feet. "I made it! Now we'd better get out of here!"

"Can you stand bad news?" asked Tubby, abruptly. I think he spoke that way to mask his thankfulness at Hartnell's quick recovery.

"Bad news?"

"Tse-Mekok's lot have got us surrounded."

Hartnell pulled a thoughtful grimace. "Confound these suits. I think my nose is bleeding and I can't even use a handkerchief."

"This is no time for personal vanity," said Tubby, unsympathetically. "Didn't you hear what I said?"

"Oh, them?" This time he did succeed in reaching his feet and turned to Pat, still smiling. "If they don't catch us in the next few minutes they won't bother—"

Tubby made little growling noises of exasperation.

"I suppose," I said, "you're waiting for us to ask why?"

Pat looked at him curiously. "Did you get in touch with the Gentle People again?"

"Oh, yes," said Hartnell. "I gave them certain advice and I'm happy to say they agreed to accept it."

Sheer perverseness made him keep up the suspense.

"Well?"

"We oughtn't to have long to wait now—"

I shrugged. "Look, Pat, it's no use asking. We've seen

him in these moods before—absolutely bursting with his own cleverness. He won't say what he's done till it happens."

"I only hope," said Tubby, hollowly, "that we're all present and correct to hear the explanation."

"Me, too," I said. "Hartnell's bright ideas are always spectacular and extreme—no half-measures."

"Really?" she said. "How exciting!"

I thought for a moment this might be sarcasm. Then, with a second look at her tense, eager face I knew she really meant it.

Young Hartnell unashamedly preened himself. "Better get well down among the seaweed," he suggested. "Pick something good and strong to hang on to. We'll need it when the fun and games start." He looked over towards the chasm. "I rather think they should be starting now—"

I hadn't the faintest idea of what was about to happen. There was a sudden unpleasant impression that something smashed me closer to the sea-bed with stupendous force and the whole world of Zello came tumbling about my ears. A titanic shock communicated itself through the water and the rocks, followed by immense roaring and bubbling sounds. Scared to death, I lay still, gripping a large, tough root with all my strength.

"Hold tight!" shouted Hartnell. "Here it comes!"

And it did! An underwater tidal wave rushed through the forest—flattening the giant kelps, tearing loose great bunches of vegetation and whipping them upwards as though in the grip of a whirlwind. Ooze swept itself from the ocean floor in huge, blinding clouds, bringing utter darkness.

Another prodigious shock knocked the breath from my body. And another—and another. Far below, vast rocks seemed to be grinding themselves to pieces. Had Hartnell—that utterly darned young fool—somehow started an earthquake?

From beyond the forest I heard terrifying rumblings, as though Nuklar's towering ramparts might be crashing into the gulf.

Then the tidal wave struck us again, this time flinging big stones around in a bombardment more terrifying than the Gentle People could have endured. Some object—a boulder or large mollusc—landed so heavily on my leg that I expected the suit to tear.

Amid the uproar I heard a little cry of alarm from Pat. "This weed—I think it's going!"

Only the headlamps saved her. I nodded my chin on the switch at the same time as beams from Hartnell and Tubby cut into the milky water like torches shining across fog. We could barely distinguish where she lay, seeing the root to which she clung tearing itself slowly but certainly from the soil under the strain. Hartnell caught her ankle at the last second, otherwise she must surely have been swept away.

"All grab each other!" I gasped. Panic caught in my throat. "Where's Tubby?"

"Over here to your right!" he called. "Make your way to me if you can!"

He had found a big, triangular spur projecting from the ocean floor. It seemed more secure than any of the miscellaneous weed growths, so we formed ourselves into a chain, each with one hand holding a neighbour's suit and the other clasping the rock, like some queer, circular sea-animal. In this way we stayed firm while the entire planet shook and groaned beneath repeated shocks and debris swept past in a mighty, roaring torrent.

Once a line of fish-men—fully a dozen—flashed into my light-beam, constricting my tired throat with fright before I could utter a sound of warning. Then they were gone, and not until some moments afterwards did I realise a peculiar thing. They swam bellies uppermost. They were dead.

How long we endured I do not know—it seemed long enough, anyway, and into my mind came that inconsequential reflection about Time being relative.

Then I suddenly became aware that the shocks had ceased, although distant rumblings persisted for a while.

Later, these also ended and Zello subsided into quietude again.

Battered, bruised and trembling, we stood up at length in the thick, silted water, able to recognise each other only as dark silhouettes. Utter blackness now reigned in these depths, which earlier had been dimly green and peaceful. What little light previously penetrated became shut off by filth blasted from a sea-bed now covered by a litter of crushed vegetation.

"Well," said Hartnell, with a sigh of satisfaction, "that ought to have done it! We won, after all!"

"We certainly did!" said Tubby, ominously.

Pat laughed. "Anyway, it was exciting while it lasted!" A note of curiosity crept into her voice. "Just what have we done?"

"Why," said Hartnell, in simulated surprise. "We've wiped Nuklar off the map—I hope!"

I stared. "But how? I mean—"

There was only one method of making sure. We struck through the devastated forest in an approximate course for the city, keeping a sharp look-out for crevices in the ground and for prowling fish-men. Successful observation would definitely have been difficult in the murk and mud, however, so it was perhaps as well that the two friends of Jolos who had assisted Hartnell caught up with us.

Frankly, their level of intelligence didn't seem particularly high and we had trouble in communicating with them. Apparently, however, they had sufficient sense when the "fun and games" started to swim into the chasm and take refuge in some cave or other.

But although we found it awkward to make known our thanks for their help, they in turn soon sent a message to Jolos and he sped to our side bursting with gratified enthusiasm.

"Greetings, O Strangers who are strangers no longer! Now shall Zello live in peace! For behold Khama and Tse-Mekko are no more, and with the end of their evil reign the spell is broken—"

From mental impressions we pictured the entire scene more vividly and completely than we could possibly have done by our own vision observations. Where Nuklar had a little earlier raised its massive, sombre ramparts of dark coral remained only an expanse of horrific devastation. Tall towers above which "Choirs of Greeting" assembled had slumped into ruin, blocking the deep, wide thoroughfares with jagged rubble; the temple where we had confronted the uncanny Khama was fallen in upon itself; the outer bastions had collapsed into that terrifying gulf where the Gentle People lived. And all around floated lifeless bodies of fish-men, many of whom must be buried under the debris.

This brought to mind a disturbing thought. "The Gentle People? Did not they suffer when part of the city fell upon their homes?"

Jolos was reassuring. "For untold centuries of oppression they have not built their palaces in the region near Nuklar. Moreover, your companion who wrought this deed of vengeance warned them of what might happen. None has suffered in this mighty and wonderful achievement save Khama and her subjects. Even my humble followers were warned by the Gentle People and made their way to outer spaces for refuge. Long shall your names be revered in the annals of Zello, O Deliverers from Tyranny!"

That seemed to be that.

"Well," said Hartnell, "looks like we've done our good deed for the day. Let's head back to the shore and get these confounded suits off!"

Our farewell journey was made in style. Nothing would please Jolos than that we went in procession, towed by a whole horde of his men, and I, for one, wasn't sorry. I doubt whether my weary legs would have taken me there unaided.

But quickly we soared above the ooze and debris, seeing once more welcome light shining through upper waters, and at last we stood on the sand with helmets not more than a few feet from the surface.

"Now go," said Jolos, "with the undying thanks of our race. In happier times, perhaps, we may see you again—"

"Who knows?" I said. "Maybe we will return to view the fine city that you build upon the ruins of Nuklar, although truly much work awaits you."

"We shall proceed to the task with cheerful hearts," he assured us solemnly. "Moreover, we shall be helped with advice from the Gentle People, to whom I will transmit your salutations."

And as we turned to wade the last few yards, I knew that thoughts of Inter-X men would often stray to those strange, unseen, peace-loving leviathans of the abyss and the five members of the *Helga's* crew who rested among them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Face of Khama

THUS we came once more to *Little Growler*. Quite a number of loose ends needed tidying up. When disaster overtook Nuklar, all fish-men must have been recalled in an attempt to deal with the emergency. At least there remained no sign of watchers near the ship, and we gave Markeson and Willson—now apparently quite recovered—notice of approach by radio.

Getting out of the suits acted like a tonic, so that while take-off preparations were made we sat round grinning at one another in pride of achievement.

"As I said before," remarked young Hartnell, "we did it!"

"Toombes might like to know," suggested Tubby. "How about calling him?"

I waved a lazy hand. "This is your show, Hartnell. Give him a pleasant surprise."

"Oh, no, Pop. You've done the dirty work up to now—don't let me rob you of the climax."

I went across to the radio desk, but before I could speak the amplifier started up.

"Controller here. Controller calling Scout Ship 46B..."

The way he said it suggested he didn't expect an answer. Obviously he had been making this routine announcement from time to time in the hope that Willson or Markeson might have regained consciousness.

Deliberately adopting a flat, monotonous tone, I said: "Outside party on Zello calling base—"

I felt certain that, despite Inter-X training in aloofness, his eyeballs must have bulged. "Outside party? But—" A second's pause. "Wait."

We waited, enjoying every moment of it.

"I'll bet the Scientific Panel are tearing their beards out by handfuls!" chuckled Pat. Every time I looked at her I agreed with Hartnell that such a girl couldn't possibly be a fully-fledged professor of zoology, but in any case I've never had a very extensive acquaintanceship with professors. I'd be willing to take a bet, though, that there weren't many like her.

"Have they really got beards? We've often wondered."

She laughed. "I don't know—they're too high in official status to bother much about women biologists. Toombes is the only one I've had dealings with—"

And as if in answer to his name, he came on the air. He didn't announce himself directly, but his voice was unmistakable.

"Controller here. Say again." Obviously he didn't believe what the duty man had told him.

I was a bit more cautious this time. "Outside party from Zello calling base—"

It might have been a gasp of surprise I heard or it might have been static. Knowing Toombes, it was probably the latter. "Make your report."

I made it.

He asked quite a lot of questions. When we reached *Old Growler* a great many more would be asked. Finally: "State the means by which Nuklar was destroyed."

I opened my mouth to speak, then shut it again. Realisation suddenly dawned on me that I hadn't the faintest idea. I had to think quickly, wondering whether I might plead a fainting fit or if a transmitter failure could be arranged. Inspiration fortunately came to my aid. "Request permission to issue full report after arrival. All personnel among outside party suffering from exhaustion."

Rather reluctantly, I thought, Toombes said: "Permission granted. Return to base with fullest speed."

Hartnell clicked his tongue reprovingly. "Impatience—"

I turned from the radio desk towards him. "You heard what the boss said—state the means."

"Oh," said Hartnell, modestly, "it was just another touch of my natural genius—"

Pat threw a book at him, but he dodged it easily enough. He looked into the telescopic visor-screen, where two tiny, glistening specks showed how relief ships were still hurrying towards Zello. He put out his tongue at them and made a derisive gesture. I sighed, reflecting that he was probably entitled to such childish gratification.

"Just what was this piece of genius?"

"Well, you remember the 'komolas,' as Tse-Mekko called 'em—methane gas bubbling up from the sea-bed? Pat was right, you know, about all the debris of an ocean drifting to the bottom—bits of weed, odd shells and fish corpses—"

"A pretty picture," agreed Tubby.

"When they reach the bottom and sink into the ooze they proceed to rot—unless, of course, the Gentle People find a few tasty snacks. Gases form from the decay and when bubbles of sufficient size accumulate they start floating to the top. But it's the pressure that makes 'em rumble and fizz towards the end of their journey. Imagine a couple of bubbles as big as your fist, say, compressed so greatly that the gas is almost reduced to liquid, finding as they near the surface that the pressure is relaxing and the gas expanding more and more—"

"Granted," I said, "the volume increases enormously at surface pressure, but I don't understand how—"

Hartnell's "natural genius," it seemed, consisted of remembering that the Gentle People knew the art of working metal. His perilous trip down the abyss had as its purpose persuading them to construct lightweight metal containers filled with methane gas piped from the ooze.

Then we realised the source of those shattering explosions which had come upon us while we lay cowering in the forest. During a metal drum's upward surge, external pressure became less and less, giving rise to enormous internal stresses. Eventually the metal blasted apart under the strain, releasing immediately huge volumes of gas and transmitting stunning shocks through the water. The principle was the same as in old-fashioned chemical explosives, that could be burnt harmlessly in open air, but which, ignited inside a container, produced violent combustion.

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Like Toombes, we had a great many questions.

"How could you calculate the depth these things exploded?" asked Pat. "They might have gone off before they actually reached Nuklar."

"Oh, the Gentle People arranged that. Once I got the basic idea across to them they became quite enthusiastic."

"Crazy!" said Tubby. "Completely crazy! I wonder the confounded things worked at all!"

"Aha!" said Hartnell, delightedly, "but they did, didn't they?"

Very satisfactorily, too, as we had learned. One of the crew in a relief ship, to whom I talked later, said the surface effects were quite colourful and spectacular. Apparently immense white fountains of spray rose time after time out of the deep blue ocean, sending water surging and rolling in huge waves out to sea and piling up giant combers on the beaches. I told him he ought to have seen what happened down below, but he said he was glad he hadn't, thank you.

"One other point," I said. "Isn't it rather out of character for the Gentle People to be associated with an idea like that?"

"Well," admitted Hartnell, candidly, "I rather wondered myself. In fact, I mentioned what I hoped would happen and asked whether it was in accordance with their principles as Gentle People who didn't believe in unnecessary killing—"

"What did they say?"

"Oh, they said they weren't as gentle as all that, especially where Khama was concerned!"

Khama! Where was she now? Jolos had declared her to be dead and personally I could well believe it. In the heart of the devastation that had been Nuklar, soaked in poisonous vapours from the exploding methane, she would lay buried by tons of jagged coral, which must have crushed the crystal casket to splinters.

And then, during one cold, shuddering second, I realised that Khama, sprawled there in death, would have assumed her natural shape—a shape that none could ever know, for Tubby's pictures taken in the temple depicted merely an

empty throne. I speculated upon a strange, invisible, formless entity—a weird consciousness possessing occult power over human beings and fishes alike, which could pluck from the subject's own secret mind a vision of shimmering, indescribable beauty to use as a lure. Perhaps, after all, there were some mysteries better left unsolved.

"I still can't get over that hypnotic hallucination business," said Hartnell. "Exactly why was it that I saw her as a lovely blonde, Tubby as a red-head, Pop as a plant, and Pat as a fish?"

"Well," I said, dryly, "I suppose it shows what some people's minds are always dwelling on!"

He didn't rise to the bait. "Apart from that, I can't help thinking there was something familiar—" His gaze strayed round the cabin and he jumped in sudden recollection. "You know, as I saw her she almost resembled you, Pat!"

A phrase sprang unbidden to my mind—words used by Tse-Mekko before we knew him in his true colours. "O ineffable Khama, in whom all men see their heart's desire . . ."

"But," went on Hartnell, puzzled, "you're not a blonde."

I saw Pat's face gay and laughing, with an exuberance of sheer mischief dancing in her eyes. "Well," she said, demurely, "these things can be arranged, you know!"

"In whom all men see their heart's desire . . ."

I wondered how long it might be before young Hartnell applied for a transfer to Kepitalon III.

THE END

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